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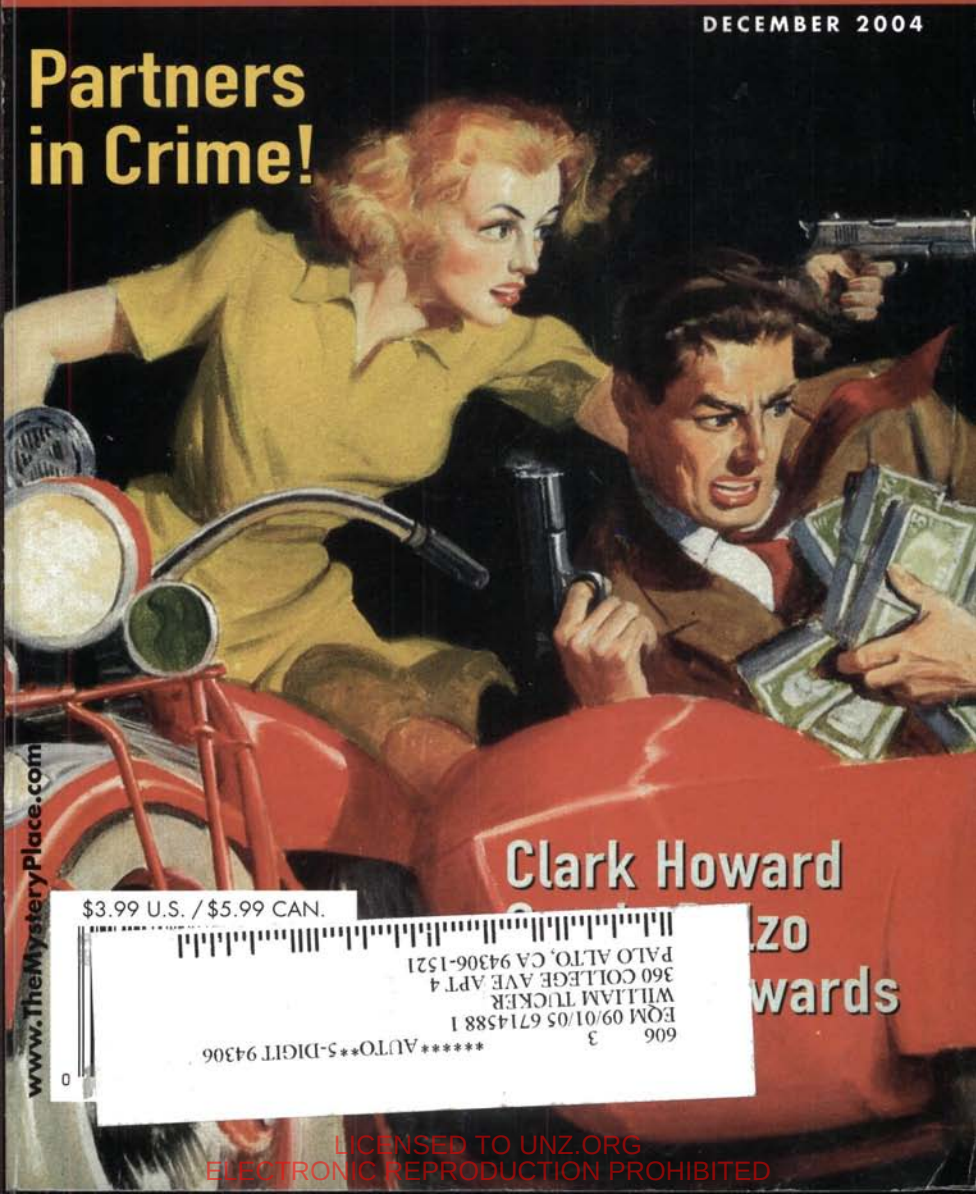

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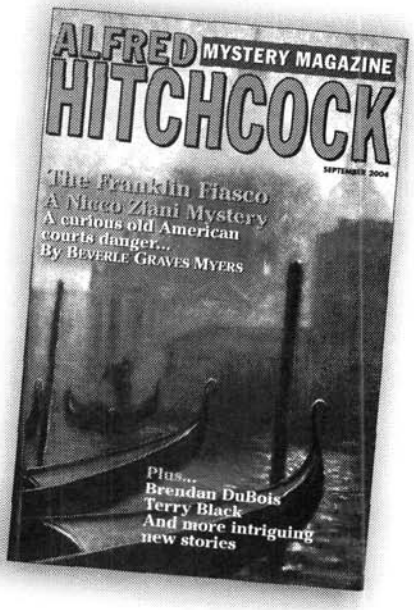

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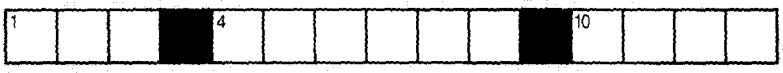

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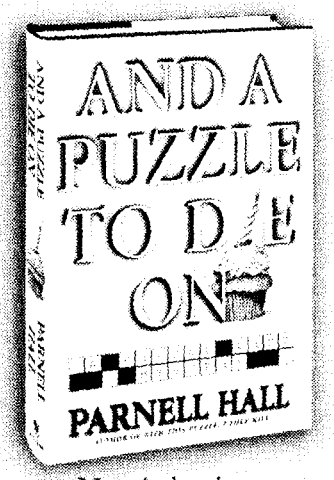

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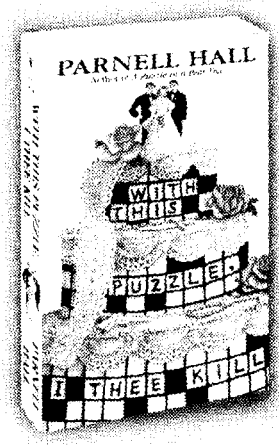

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VISCERY

by Sandy Balzo

The dream was in living color, and she was gorgeous: blond, blue-eyed, and young—maybe twenty to my thirty-three. And svelte, 110 pounds against my 175.

She also was tall, though since we were horizontal it was hard to be certain about that. The top of her head came up to my nose, putting her about five inches shorter than my 6'1", assuming we were lined up toe-to-toe. Which we no longer were, since she was slipping slowly down my torso, her blond hair leaving my face to brush my neck, then my chest, then my belly, then—

Sandy Balzo works, by day, in public relations. In 1995, she formed her own company, Balzo Communications, and began to represent mystery writers and organizations such as MWA. In 2003, her first fiction, *The Grass Is Always Greener,* was published in *EQMM.* It won the Robert L. Fish Award for best story by a new writer and is currently nominated for the Anthony and Macavity Awards. Her first novel, *Uncommon Grounds,* is due in November.

I woke up startled, not sure what had awakened me so abruptly, but ready to wreak vengeance on whatever it was that had, whether human or mechanical.

That's when I realized I'd been drugged.

I lay still for a moment, trying hard to concentrate on the white ceiling fan above me. My vision was blurry, and my limbs felt heavy, weighted down. I tried to shift position and realized it was the covers of the bed that were pinning me. The blanket and sheet were pulled up to my neck and tucked in snug on each side, as if I'd slipped into the bed unseen as it was being made.

I blinked, then blinked again, trying to clear my hazy vision. A woman loomed over me suddenly, her face close to mine, a macabre reprisal of my dream—the *early* moments of my dream, thank the Lord, for this woman was *not* the woman of my dreams.

No, this woman was very old and very ugly. White hair, faded eyes, and on one cheek, a nickel-size brown mole that looked like it could crawl away under its own power. I turned my head away as I realized with horror that she intended to kiss me. The kiss landed on my ear rather than my lips. Repulsed even so, I rolled sideways

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intending to dislodge the covers and hit the floor running.

Sluggish from the drug, I hit the floor, all right, but headfirst and still tangled in the blanket. As I struggled to free myself, the woman appeared next to me, extending a pale, bony hand.

I shrank away from her touch. "What do you want?" I croaked. My voice sounded hoarse and uneven to me, though perhaps that was because my ears seemed stuffed with cotton.

What the hell had they given me?

And who were *they?*

What did they want?

The last thing I remembered was kissing Sarah and our baby girl, Kathleen, goodbye and driving to work at the bank. My car was a just-off-the-assembly-line '62 Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight, and I clearly remembered parking it snug along the wall in the executive parking ramp in order to leave as much space as possible between it and Hal Schultz's Caddy. Mr. Schultz was our bank president, and he had the habit of opening his Cadillac's driver-side door with the reckless abandon of the very rich and very privileged.

When I'd been driving my old '57 Chevy, I hadn't minded as much. And truth be told, it wouldn't have done my career or my Chevy any good to complain anyway.

But now, with my promotion secure, and the Oldsmobile paid for in cash, I did mind. I had bought the car with the bonus I'd gotten when I'd been named SVP. That's *Senior* Vice President, which is the step above First Vice President, which is a step above plain old Vice President, which is a step above Assistant Vice President. Sunset Bank, as a friend of mine likes to point out, has more VPs than customers.

I'd been through all the ranks and now was second-in-command, the youngest man ever to have achieved that post, with all the stock options and indemnifications to prove it.

I tried to remember: I'd parked my car and then . . . what?

I didn't know.

The crone's voice interrupted my drug-induced reverie. "I'm going to help you up, and then we're going to take a bath."

That got me moving. "The hell we are," I said, shoving her hard. She fell backwards on her rump, and I managed to get myself untangled and onto my feet.

The woman crawled a couple of steps toward the door. I felt bad for pushing the old lady, but I'd been pushed myself, far beyond my limits.

"You've hurt me, John." She said it matter-of-factly, like she was used to being hurt.

She knew my name, too, which told me that whatever had happened, whoever had taken me, it hadn't been random. I'd been targeted for this abduction. But why?

The logical answer, of course, was my new job, the one I'd been

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flashing around like a giggly girl with an engagement ring: *Look at me, I'm a Senior Vice President! Look at my car! Look at my benefits package!*

What an idiot. Bank executives already were attractive targets for kidnappers, banks having money and all, and I'd practically stood on a street corner with my thumb stuck out waiting to be picked up.

But vague regret over my stupidity was about as far as my brain would take me in its current addled state. And my body wasn't doing much better. In fact, the surge of energy that had gotten me upright had left me even weaker in its wake.

So much so that while I'd been ruminating, the old lady already was up and at the door. "I'm going to have to lock you in, John. I don't want to do that."

She sounded as if she meant it. Probably thinking about that bath we were missing.

"Then don't," I said, finally willing myself the four steps across the room toward her.

She stepped into the hall, putting the edge of the open door between us. "I'm sorry, but you leave me no choice."

She shook her head wearily and her necklace and the loose flesh beneath it swung back and forth in time to the movement.

I blinked my eyes twice, and the haze cleared for a moment. Dangling on the chain around her neck was a wedding ring. *My* wedding ring. I grabbed it and yanked, breaking the chain. "That's *mine,* damn it," I yelled, suddenly beside myself with fury, a merciful break from the fear and confusion. "How dare you touch me, how dare . . ."

That's when I realized I was standing there in my undershorts. Not only had the old crone taken my wedding ring from my finger while I was unconscious, she had undressed me. The thought made me sick.

I raised my fist, the ring still clutched in it. I'm not sure if I really would have punched her, but she didn't give me the chance. She slammed the door in my face, and I heard the lock turn.

She didn't move away, though. "You don't need that ring," she hissed from the other side. "And your marriage? Your wife? You can forget them, too, John."

I backed away, nearly tripping over the bed in my eagerness to escape the malignancy that seemed to seep right through the door.

Jesus. Did they have Sarah, too? But where were they holding her? Did they mean to kill her? Or me? Or both of us?

I looked at the wedding ring in my hand.

Sarah. Quite literally the blond, blue-eyed girl of my dreams, though that was the twenty-year-old Sarah. The Sarah I'd met in college.

Now, some nine years later, she was still just as beautiful, if a little less . . . uninhibited. The fact that I still dreamed of her, and

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no one else, never failed to stagger me.

Sarah. I slipped the ring on my finger. "Will I ever see you again?" I whispered.

And Kathleen. What would become of our baby if both Sarah and I were . . . gone? My brother would take her in and love her, I knew. But Kathleen would grow up never knowing her parents, not being able to remember so much as a trip to the zoo or a hug or a kiss from us. I imagined Kathleen poring over yellowed baby pictures, desperately trying to manufacture memories to fit the photos.

I knew I was wallowing, but even the idea of Kathleen growing up without us wasn't nearly as bad as the alternative—the thought I refused to entertain: that they had our baby, too, and meant her harm.

No. Thinking of that would do me little good, and would do Sarah and Kathleen even less. But I did need to think—to think of a way out. I sat down on the bed.

I'd been kidnapped—that much was clear. I wondered how many people had been involved. The woman had to have at least one male accomplice. Even if she had managed to undress me, she wouldn't have been able to move me while I was unconscious.

So what was her partner doing right now?

Making a ransom demand?

And what would the bank do in response?

If Schultz couldn't be bothered *not* to bash my car door with his every day, could he be bothered to hand over a hundred thousand—or more—in ransom?

A knock at the door made me jump up, or try to. This exertion/exhaustion was becoming a tiresome cycle. I heaved myself off the bed and toward the door. "Who's there?"

The old woman or the accomplice? The Lady or the Tiger—though in this case they both were losing propositions.

"I have your medication."

Medication? Did she really think I was going to let her drug me voluntarily?

Apparently so. "You'll feel better if you take it," the crone crooned.

I'd feel better only when I was out of here, when I'd found Sarah and knew that she and our baby were safe. But for now I needed to play along. The fact that the old woman wanted me to take another dose meant the current one must be wearing off. So, bad as I still felt, there wouldn't be a better time to make a break for it.

"All right," I said, purposely making my voice weak. "I *am* feeling lousy."

"Of course you are," she said, fiddling with the lock. "That's because you got so angry. You mustn't—" She opened the door.

I stepped behind it, using the solid wood as a shield like she

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had, and checked behind her for her accomplice. No one.

She came in with a glass of water. I noticed it was a plastic glass, oxymoronic as that sounded, probably so I couldn't break it and gain a weapon. And God knows I'd gladly gut the hag if it would get me home.

The old woman held the glass out to me with one hand and reached into her voluminous apron pocket with the other.

That's when I struck, knocking the glass out of her hand and bolting from the room. My right hip was hurting, probably from the fall out of the bed. I could hear the old woman yelling my name as I hightailed it down the hall and into a living room.

My vision was still hazy, and I searched frantically for a door. There. On the far wall next to the television set.

I dashed across the room and undid the door chain. Then I turned the knob and pulled. The door stayed shut. I checked the lock button in the doorknob. It was popped out, meaning the door was unlocked. And the knob turned easily enough, but still the door wouldn't open. What the hell?

I jiggled the knob.

"You can't get out." The old woman was right behind me. I could feel her attic-stale breath on the back of my neck.

I pulled frantically at the door again, only then noticing a third lock. One that could be opened only with a key.

"You can't get out," the old woman repeated. "You might as well sit down on the couch. I'll get your breakfast." Then she walked away.

I slumped against the door. Somehow the fact that she could go off to make breakfast, secure in the knowledge that I was trapped, was more demoralizing than anything to this point.

She came back in with a Melmac coffee cup. "Sit down on the couch," she said again.

I obeyed. I didn't know what else to do.

"Here's your coffee. Not too hot, so you won't burn yourself. Or me." A ghost of a smile, exposing her yellowing teeth and crinkling the hideous mole on her cheek. I took the coffee, and she turned and left me again.

I set the cup on the end table. Did she think I was stupid? The coffee had to be drugged.

The woman came back into the room. "You need to calm down, you know. Would you like the television on?" I didn't answer, but she crossed the room to a Zenith and punched a couple of buttons anyway. Then she went back to what I presumed was the kitchen.

That got me to thinking about where *I* might be.

Ignoring the game show on the screen, I looked around the room for a newspaper or anything that would tell me whether I was still in Sunset. At least then, assuming I could get my hands on a phone, I could give the police a place to start.

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But no newspaper, no telephone, no nothing. I eyed the TV set—a station ID might give me the information I needed.

But John Daly presiding over *What's My Line?* wasn't going to help much. Pushing myself up off the couch and across the room to the television, I checked behind me for the old woman before changing the channel.

A Tom and Jerry cartoon. Kathleen's favorite, but it wasn't going to tell me where I was. I pressed on past a Nile River travelogue and *The Guiding Light,* too.

Then an anchorman appeared on the screen. That stopped me short. News in the morning meant something big must have happened. I started to punch the volume up, but an age-spotted hand reached in and shut the set off.

"You have no need to be watching that."

The way she said it made me certain they had no intention of letting me go. Ransom or not.

The old lady had carried in a TV table topped with a plate of bacon and eggs and set it down. I'd been so engrossed in changing channels, I hadn't even heard her. I would have to be more careful.

"Sit on the couch, and I'll put this in front of you," she said.

Again, I did what I was told. For now. My plan was to conserve my strength, so I'd be ready when an opportunity to escape presented itself. Maybe it would be when the mail was delivered, or a repairman came. Whatever, it had to be before the old lady's accomplice returned.

She set the TV table in front of me. "Should I cut up your eggs?"

She assumed I'd drunk the coffee, and the drugs were taking effect. "Yes," I mumbled, playing along. If I could get my hands on a knife, maybe I could force her to tell me where Sarah was before I made my escape.

But when she pulled the linty knife out of her apron pocket, it was a plastic non-serrated one that wouldn't cause so much as a paper cut. I could do more damage with a manilla file folder.

The old woman sawed the two fried eggs and bacon into a runny mess and surveyed me. "Do you need me to feed you?"

Ugh. Playing drugged or not, that was *not* going to happen. "No, I can do it." I picked up the fork.

As I did so, she grabbed my other hand. "John, I need to have that ring back."

She was talking about the wedding ring, Sarah's and mine. I tried to pull my hand away from her, but the old crone was surprisingly strong.

"I'll keep it safe for you," she promised.

Sure, by hanging it around that withered old neck of yours again, I thought. My head was pounding, and the anger surged. Almost without thinking, I plunged the fork into the back of her

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hand as she pawed at my fingers.

She screamed and let go.

I was up like a flash, searching for another way out. Behind me I could hear the old woman, on the phone in the kitchen, urging someone to get help. Her accomplice, of course. If I didn't get out now, I knew I never would.

The place was like a jail, though, every window barred with decorative wrought iron. The only one without the fleur-de-lis prison bars was the picture window. I would have to go through it.

Looking around the room for something to break the glass, I settled on a small armchair. Problem was, my strength was waning again, and I wasn't sure if I could pick up the chair, much less throw it through the window.

As I struggled with it, I heard the old woman behind me. By sheer strength of will—or, perhaps, sheer panic—I picked up the chair and put it through the window. As the crone's fingernails clawed at my back, I scrambled awkwardly through, landing hard on the wooden porch beyond.

I pulled myself up with the help of the porch railing. Behind me, I could hear the crone unlocking the door. She might be too old to make it through the window, but then she didn't have to. She had a key to the door.

As I turned to barrel down the porch steps, the old woman already was pushing her way through the aluminum storm door. One step down, I turned and caught a glimpse of something reflected obliquely in the mirrored glass of the open door.

It stopped me cold.

Sarah.

She was standing on the porch to the right of the door, her hair covered in pellets of shattered glass. She appeared unharmed.

"Sarah." I said it aloud this time, but she didn't answer, didn't move toward me. She seemed lost. Drugged, of course.

I reached up and grabbed her by the arm. "Sarah, we have to get away from here."

Confused, she tried to twist away from me. I wondered where they had kept her, and how she had gotten away. I wondered if Kathleen was safe. But there was no time to ask now. We had to run.

I pulled at Sarah again, managing to propel her down the one step to me. But that was as far as we got. The old woman had Sarah's other arm, the two of us playing tug-of-war with my wife as the human rope.

What's worse, I was losing. With one gigantic effort, the old woman yanked Sarah back up and away from the edge of the porch.

I lost my grip and fell back, just managing to catch myself on the stair railing. My heart was thudding and my ears were ringing as I tried to climb back up. Meanwhile, the crone was trying to

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push Sarah into the house.

As I got to them the ringing in my ears turned into a high-pitched wail. Was it Sarah screaming? The old woman keening insanely? I couldn't tell. Everything was bedlam.

Then, suddenly, the old woman let go of Sarah and backed off.

I didn't understand why until I saw the police car pull up in front of the house.

It hadn't been ringing or wailing, screaming or keening I'd been hearing, but the siren of the approaching squad car. Someone must have heard the commotion and called the police. As I glanced at the house next-door, I saw a curtain twitch. God bless nosy neighbors.

Two officers got out of the squad car.

I took a deep, grateful breath and went to Sarah. "Honey, it's okay. We're safe." I tried to kiss her, but she turned away.

"LET HER GO," from one of the cops.

I did as he asked, affected more by the look of revulsion on Sarah's face than by the barked order.

The officers came around their car, and I unsteadily descended the porch steps to meet them.

"Thank God you're here," I told an officer with sandy hair. "This woman is holding me against my will. My wife and I—"

But the burly officer grasped my arm and started to tow me toward the house. "C'mon, sir. Let's go inside."

"You don't understand," I said, trying desperately to shake him off. "I've been kidnapped. I'm John Collins, Senior Vice President of Sunset Bank."

"Sure." He kept right on walking, dragging me along with him back up the porch steps.

What in the hell was going on? I felt like I'd fallen into an episode of *The Twilight Zone.* Rod Serling would appear any moment. Or even better, Allen Funt, ordering me to "Smile, you're on *Candid Camera!"*

I knew I wasn't thinking clearly, but I also knew I had to do something. Now.

Yanking my arm free at the top of the steps, I lost my balance and landed hard on one knee in front of Sarah. I took her hand. "Please, honey. Tell them who I am."

But, again, she wouldn't look at me.

"Sarah. Don't you know me, honey?"

The beautiful blue eyes—Sarah's eyes—turned toward me. They were filled with tears. "I know you, Daddy."

Daddy? Daddy?

As the officer walked me into the house, I caught sight of a reflection in the mirrored storm door. A big, sandy-haired man in police uniform. And a shriveled, shuffling old man in his underwear.

Daddy? ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

EIGHTEENTH SUMMER

by Mitsuhara Yuri

Translated from the Japanese by Beth Cary

Mitsuhara Yuri is a writer of poetry, children's stories, fantasy, and mystery fiction. Her entry in our Passport to Crime series was the co-winner (along with Norizuki Rintarō, whose story we published in January) of the 2002 Mystery Writers of Japan Award for short stories. Ms. Mitsuhara's first mystery novel, *Let's Forget Our Watches and Go to the Forest,* was published in 1998. Please note that the author's name and names in the story are rendered in Japanese order: surname first.

1.

A sky colored pale, as if smoothed by a brush dipped in water. Faint sunlight falling on the river's surface. A row of cherry trees halfway to full bloom lining the far bank of the river. On this side, a woman seated near the river sketching. He could still see it all. If it were a painting, he would have called it "Spring."

Alas, the scene no longer existed. The sky was deeper now; the sunlight unbearably hot and harsh. The cherry trees were fully green and silent. And near the riverbank, a gaping hole that could never be filled.

On that spring evening, Miura Shinya stopped to stare back across the bridge just before he left it. This pause had become a habitual part of his evening jog. A few days earlier, just as the cherry blossoms began to open, Shinya's own pale fragile hopes had fallen. He would have to spend another entire year studying to retake the university entrance exams.

He always felt somewhat unsettled during spring vacation. But this year he felt more completely adrift than ever before: vaguely lonely, at loose ends, and yet oddly relieved. He was afraid that he would become slack, especially physically, so he started jogging, even though he realized that jogging would look like slacking to others. He told his family that he would spend the rest of March recovering

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from the long, drawn-out cramming for exams. This was hardly an adequate explanation, but it was the best he could offer. Then, unexpectedly, something happened to rekindle his interest in life.

The bridge Shinya jogged across overlooked the grassy riverbank. In the distance, just about twenty meters away, she was sitting on the grass, tracing with colored pencils on paper clipped to her drawing board. *I hope it looks like I'm just taking in the scene,* Shinya thought. He stood there staring, content to feel the breeze come and go.

Suddenly, she put the drawing board down, stood up, turned around, and bent over to look at the far side of the river through her legs. She put her hands wide apart on the grass and gracefully stretched up into a handstand. Her white cap fell off and her ponytail hung down. From the handstand, she rolled gently forward onto the ground. It wasn't the first time he'd observed her, and once in a while he'd seen her move like this, with graceful ease. She reminded him of fairies he'd seen in animated videos.

She lay there looking up at the sky for a while, her arms and legs outstretched. Then she stood up, picked up her cap, and reached for her drawing board. The sun was sinking, and the river breeze was turning chilly. A gust of wind blew across the river, catching her drawing. It fluttered away from her, a bird flying from her hands. It turned, twisting in the wind, moving toward him. He could see pale colors on one side.

When the breeze carried it over his head, without thinking, Shinya ran after it. Eventually, the breeze weakened and the paper drifted down to dance along the grass, but just as it seemed sure to stop, another gust took it farther. Shinya felt that the sketch was mocking him, daring him to "Come over here." His impatience got the best of him and he dove for the irritating piece of paper, finally stopping its flight.

The sketch centered on the row of cherry trees on the opposite bank of the river. The delicate lines of colored pencil captured the faintly tinted trees, which seemed to rejoice in their springtime rebirth. A gray roof peeked through the trees. He couldn't tell about technique, but he thought it was a good drawing. If only there wasn't a crease down the middle. When he had collided with the paper, he had crushed it.

When she finally caught up, the first thing she said to Shinya, who was trying to get up off the grass, was, "Hey, you, what are you doing?"

She was wearing a pink T-shirt, a tight apple-green jacket, and slim white jeans. The spring colors on her slender body made her seem almost as young as a student, but he couldn't really tell a woman's age. She was definitely over twenty-five, and maybe

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almost thirty.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I messed it up."

She stamped her foot as if annoyed at his apology.

"That's not what I meant. You shouldn't chase so wildly after something I'll throw away anyway. If you got hurt, that would be idiotic."

"Throw away?"

"Sure. I don't have any interest in keeping my own trash."

"Trash? . . . But you went to such effort to draw it."

"Yes, I did. But only because I enjoy sketching. Once I've finished, I don't even want to look at it."

Feeling as if he had suddenly been tied in knots, Shinya looked at the beautiful "trash" and then back at her. If her eyes had been half a millimeter larger, they would have made her face overbearing; her nose was pointed like a small bird's beak. Her blunt manner of speaking with those naturally light pink lips was at odds with her delicate beauty, but this only called forth more images from his childhood and increased his nostalgia. Wasn't she called Tinkerbell in *Peter Pan,* that whimsical, sassy, cold-hearted fairy with the miraculous dust that enabled children to fly?

"Come on, get up already. . . . Oh!"

Her husky alto voice went up a notch when she stretched out one hand toward Shinya and saw a cut on the palm of his hand. He had scraped it when he dove for her drawing.

With the efficient manner of one accustomed to getting things done, she quickly decided what to do. "That needs to be looked after. I live right over there."

She took the drawing out of Shinya's hand and tucked it onto her drawing board.

Shinya mumbled that he was all right, but he decided to follow her lead, even though licking the scratch would have healed it.

"Won't it disturb your family?"

"No, I live alone."

"Oh, then . . . won't it annoy your boyfriend?"

He was feeling his way around, but she just laughed scornfully and said, "This is it."

Shinya looked up, surprised at the building where she stopped, just below the levee where she had been drawing her picture. He knew about this building. It was not far from his house just across the river. It had been built a few decades before, and there were numerous cracks in the gray outer wall. It was sure to collapse in the next strong earthquake. Only the lights in several of the windows at night kept it from being mistaken for an abandoned building: It was that sort of apartment house. Its name, "Shōraisō," was old fashioned as well. With his average grade in Japanese, Shinya wasn't able to pronounce the old-fashioned characters. He had

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heard the rumor that there was a dispute between the owner and his son and daughter-in-law. The owner didn't want to evict any tenants, while the son wanted to convert the property into a fashionable, upscale apartment building while interest rates were still low. Because all the tenants were elderly, it was only a matter of time until the son and his wife won the battle. The rumors were tinged with black humor, and some said that all those old people were unnaturally tenacious and might outlive the younger couple. In any case, Shinya did not think it was the sort of place where a young female artist would live.

Her room was on the second floor, up a flight of stairs that creaked each step of the way. The door was dented in toward the bottom, no doubt a souvenir from a previous tenant. Pasted on it was a small piece of paper with the surname "Suō" hurriedly written on it. She must not have wanted it known that she was a woman living alone.

The inside of her apartment matched the outside of the building. The kitchen space offered merely a plain sink and cooktop. Then came the main room with a closet. It appeared that there was a door to a toilet, but he was willing to bet that there was nothing as fancy as a bath. Shinya had never been to a Zen temple, but he thought he would have to go to one to find living quarters more Spartan than these. Also, she had hardly any furniture, so that even this cramped living space felt bare. There was a small refrigerator in the kitchen, and in the living room, a little dresser and a low table. By the window stood an old desk and wastebasket. This was all the furniture he saw. How was it possible for a woman to live like this? It was so different from his older sister's room, cluttered with all her belongings. Faded, weathered-brown tatami mats edged around the heated carpet in the center of the room.

"Go on in," she said, impatient behind him. "I've just moved in."

Without realizing it, he had stared through the door for so long that it had seemed rude. Shinya felt flustered as he took off his shoes. He had thought the "Rooms for Rent" sign posted at the entry to the building was a joke. Now he had the strange impression that it was effective. Even so, you would think that a person who had recently moved in would have had a bit more furniture.

It crossed his mind that perhaps he should leave the door open, since he was alone with a woman. But she closed it without any sign of concern.

After she put her drawing board on the desk, she took a bottle of Mercurochrome and a packet of tissues from the drawer. What a makeshift life, if you kept your first-aid kit in your desk.

Without the least shyness, she grabbed Shinya's hand and applied the disinfectant. She said, "You must think it strange that I don't have anything here."

"Yes." His candid reply made her laugh out loud.

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She let go of Shinya's hand. For a while he could still feel the touch of her slender fingers.

"I use my home in I—— as my office." She mentioned a station on a private line twenty minutes away. "But it's too small now—I've had a lot of work recently, and there's no room left even to sleep. I was thinking of moving when I found an empty room here. I try to work at home during the day and sleep over here."

"And sometimes you sketch in the early evenings."

She looked wide-eyed at Shinya, momentarily at a loss as to how to respond. Then she said, "I suppose so."

She stood up. His chance remark had let her know that he had been watching her. Actually, he wasn't entirely sure it was a slip of the tongue. Maybe he'd intentionally let it slip out.

She'd gone to the refrigerator to get something.

Shinya made another attempt at conversation. "You mentioned your office. What type of work do you do, um . . . Ms. Suō?"

She turned to face him, surprised by his blunt question.

Shinya hurriedly added, "That's right, isn't it? That is how your name is pronounced? It was on the front door."

"Ahh," she said. "I'm surprised you could read it. It's written in very old characters for dark, purplish red. My name is Suō Kumiko. Kumi is written with the characters for crimson and beautiful. My whole name is steeped in red tones. I feel that it sounds unpleasantly hot."

"No. It's very pretty."

She laughed disdainfully at his trite response and set a can of iced coffee down in front of him.

She told him that this was all she had to offer, then she answered his question. "I'm a freelance designer."

"Really? So that's why you like to draw."

"I've liked drawing ever since I was a child, but my work doesn't require that I draw."

"Even though you're a designer?"

Kumiko seemed used to this kind of question, and her reply was matter-of-fact. "That's right. A designer's work . . . " She stopped, stuck for a good example. "Well, that's why sometimes I simply want to draw for the pure pleasure of it. . . . What about you?"

Shinya drank his coffee while he thought over her question. It was not so difficult, she probably just wanted to know his name.

"My name is Miura Shinya. I live nearby."

"Are you a high-school student?"

"Starting in April, I'll be an exam prep-school student."

She told him to study hard, giving the standard response without much enthusiasm. She put the medicine and tissues back in the desk drawer. Then she took her picture from the drawing board and tore it in half and then in half again. She threw the shreds into

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the wastebasket. What she had said earlier was true. She looked at Shinya, raised her well-shaped eyebrows, and said, "What?"

"Well, if you were just going to throw it away, I would have liked to have it."

"No."

He had kept his tone light and teasing and was surprised that her response was so severe. There was nothing more to say about it. He drifted back to their previous topic.

"This apartment, um . . . isn't it inconvenient?"

"Well, it hasn't bothered me because I just come here to sleep, but I might feel that way once I get used to it."

Shinya gulped down the coffee, which was too cold for this season, and tried to shake off the thrill he felt when he heard her say, "come here to sleep."

"I don't mean to insult your landlord, but why did you pick this place?" He felt he sounded pushy, but Kumiko didn't seem suspicious.

"It was partly by chance. I happened to see the sign when I passed by. And then . . . I was taken with the view from the window."

Kumiko reached across the desk and opened the window. Shinya stood and walked over to it. Kumiko took his place sitting near the low table. With her long legs, it suited her just right to sit cross-legged on the floor.

Outside the window was a balcony, too small to call a veranda, but just right for drying laundry. There were four pots on the balcony. This seemed out of keeping with the rest of the apartment, which lacked even basic furniture. The pots were plastic, small enough to be encircled by two hands. It might be dangerous to place heavy terra cotta pots on such a tiny drying-balcony. Something might have been planted in the pots, but nothing poked through the surface of the black dirt.

The evening light was turning lavender. The riverbank, the river, and the row of cherry trees were all about to melt quietly into the evening dusk. It was such an ordinary scene. Yet, in the magic of the spring sunset, it was strangely nostalgic and comforting—the kind of scene many Japanese would identify as one of their original childhood memories. Shinya did not tell her then that the gray roof peeking through the trees was his house.

"Besides, the rent on this apartment is incredibly low."

Kumiko, who looked like a fairy or woodland sprite, suddenly came out with this pragmatic explanation. Shinya was amused by the incongruity, and it gave him an idea.

"Are there any empty rooms left?" he asked.

"I think so. Why?"

"If it's that cheap, I might as well rent a room here to use as a study. My older sister is living at home now; she's going to have a

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baby. It's already very chaotic at home, and it'll only get worse after the baby is born. I was wanting to have some quiet space for myself."

Shinya kept his gaze on the landscape outside, so he couldn't see Kumiko's expression.

"Really?" she said. "Then it would be just right for you."

She sounded a little surprised, but she didn't seem to object. Maybe her mind was on something else.

2.

When he went to talk to the landlord, who lived next-door, he was able to reach an agreement right away. Perhaps the landlord was reassured because Shinya was the son of a family who lived in the neighborhood. Or perhaps he didn't want to take his eyes off the rerun of the samurai drama he was watching. Anyway, he told Shinya, "You can move into any empty room anytime you like."

It fact, the room rent was astonishingly low. The rumor may have been true that the old man refused to give up managing the apartment building only to spite his son and daughter-in-law. However, he wasn't joking when he glared at Shinya from beneath his long white eyebrows and said, "There's no fire insurance. So it's up to you to be careful."

When Shinya told his parents he'd rented a room to study in, they didn't have any serious objections. Shinya felt reassured on many levels. At first, his mother thought it would be too expensive, but when she heard how low the rent was, she must have been relieved, and she seemed unconcerned about her son living alone. After all, she was fully occupied with the family's major event—the birth of her first grandchild. She really had no time to think about her son.

Shinya privately thought his mother was much improved. She was now forty-eight years old and had become worried about her health. The doctor told her that there was nothing wrong with her, so it must have just been menopause. Shinya thought the various minor complaints she had were tedious, and he'd largely ignored her. But about a month ago, it seemed to affect her mentally. She seemed very depressed, and several times he saw her lost in thought, sitting in the dark, too listless to bother turning on the lights. Both Shinya and his father began to think there must be something seriously the matter with her. Even though they began to feel worried, at such times men are utterly useless. They were lucky, because just at that time, Shinya's sister returned home to await the birth of her baby.

Shinya's sister had nerves of steel, and because she was a woman, she was able to be more sympathetic to their mother. Shinya and his father never inquired about the details, but his mother was able to pour her heart out to her daughter. And, as the due date drew closer, his mother became so involved in all the preparations for this solemn event that she had no time to complain of general malaise.

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He was glad that she was in better spirits, but the trade-off was that she had become obsessed with preparing for the arrival of her grandchild. Now, if Shinya's behavior or his father's bothered her, she would scold them or shout at them. And Shinya knew that once the baby came, he wouldn't be able to stand the stress of studying for his exams in such a crazy household. He needed an escape. If he could move into that apartment, he could kill several birds with one stone.

Once Shinya left home, he knew his father would bear the brunt of his mother's irritable temper, and he felt sorry for him. But she was his wife, after all. He had only himself to blame. As for his sister, she seemed to think that everything should revolve around the baby she was carrying, so her mother's hysterics wouldn't affect her very much.

His mother's only concern about his living alone was his eating habits. So he agreed to eat at home, as she wished. The apartment was only a three-minute walk away, so it wasn't such a big deal. He also decided to continue to sleep at home, because he didn't want the hassle of buying a whole new set of futon and bedding. And, with this sort of "semi-independent" living, he didn't have to care about the lack of fire insurance.

In the end, all he bought was a small low table. He took an extra electric kettle and some coffee cups that his parents had received as gifts. These few things furnished his modest retreat. He carried his study materials back and forth. If he should find that he needed something else, he would get it at that point. He took Kumiko as a model: She was already set up in her simplified life.

Kumiko's room was just above his. She was a quiet resident, out at work for most of the day. He pretended to go to his prep school, but came straight to the apartment instead. He hung around and thought he could sense her presence. Even on her days off or at night her apartment was quiet, with no sound of a television or voices from possible visitors. Still, he could tell she was there. He couldn't figure out what she was doing, but he listened to her movements. And he realized that she was not a sprite from a fairy tale—she had the heft of a real person. He would stop turning the pages of his book, lost in listening. He had to force himself to focus and continue reading. By the middle of April, just a little over two weeks after he had moved in, he had finished reading two of Shiba Ryōtarō's historical novels: *Ryōma Goes Forth* and *Burning Sword.* He wished his life were as exciting as that time past, when the whole course of Japan's history shifted because it had to open to the West and to modernity. He wanted to feel vital and determined, no matter how hard the struggle might be.

His reference books and review texts stayed in the shoulder bag he carried back and forth between apartment and home.

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One day, Shinya knocked on Kumiko's dented front door. She peeked out, and when she saw him, she looked surprised.

"What about your school?"

"My sister went into labor this morning."

"Oh?"

"It was sheer chaos, with my mother beside herself."

"So?"

"That's all."

"That's not an excuse to miss school."

"What about you?"

"It's the prerogative of a freelancer. I don't feel like working today, so I'm taking the day off."

"In that case, here's something for you."

Shinya showed her the package of strawberries that he'd lifted from the refrigerator at home.

Kumiko was taken aback. "Come on in," she said.

The heated carpet had been taken up. Other than that, the room looked the same as it had three weeks earlier. She was wearing a bulky beige sweater and blue jeans. She seemed to have been drawing. Her drawing board and colored pencils were out on the low table. Clearly there was nothing else for her to do in this barren room. In soft colors, she had drawn the scene outside her window. The plastic pots on the veranda were there. Small seedlings pushed up through the dirt, just as he remembered they had when he was in elementary school.

Kumiko cleared the table, putting away the drawing board and colored pencils. She rinsed the strawberries and returned them to their package. Again, he realized how stark her room was.

"How old is your sister?"

"Um . . . twenty-five."

"So, she's seven years older than you, kid."

She sat cross-legged as she had done before. He wasn't pleased that she called him "kid," but it sounded so natural that he didn't feel like objecting.

"I guess so. And what about you, Ms. Suō?" he asked.

"Let me see, I'm much, much older," she said, stressing the difference.

She took her third strawberry. He felt she had avoided answering his question.

"Are you drawing morning glories?" he asked, glancing at the sketch lying on the tatami mat.

"Yeah, sort of, since they've finally sprouted."

Kumiko pointed to the balcony with a shiny red strawberry. Then she slowly put it in her mouth.

"You must really love morning glories to have planted four pots of them."

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"I don't know. I just wanted to plant the same flower to see which one would bloom first."

"Are you making them compete?"

"Yes, I've even named them. From the right: Father, Mother, Boy, Girl."

"What's that about?" he asked, barely able to keep from laughing.

Kumiko didn't notice. She stared into the distance, focused on the sky beyond the balcony.

"Your sister will probably say to her baby, 'Grow up quickly.'"

"I suppose so. Most parents do, don't they?"

She ignored Shinya, who was confused by her comment, and continued, "It's strange. All living things must die. Growing up means getting closer to death. The earlier a flower blooms, the sooner it will wither and die."

Kumiko smiled faintly, a very beautiful smile. But at the same time, it was a heavy smile, so heavy that a fairy's delicate wings wouldn't be able to carry it.

Once again, Shinya appeared at her door when he should have been at school. Again, Kumiko seemed surprised. She was wearing an old oversized T-shirt, and her face was flushed.

"What on earth are you up to?" she asked.

"This should tell you." He pulled a can of peaches out of a paper bag.

"What am I supposed to see?"

"Isn't this a typical get-well gift?"

"That's not what I meant. What about school . . . ?" She only got that far before she surrendered to a fit of coughing.

"Just go back to bed. Our landlord told me you were in bed with a terrible cold."

Muttering a string of epithets such as "you disobedient no-good son" under her breath, Kumiko turned and went back. She sat down on her futon and folded her legs beside her. Then she pulled the covers over her knees. Each movement was labored.

"Did you go to the doctor?"

"No, it takes too much effort."

"Do you have a fever?"

"I don't have a thermometer."

"Are you eating?"

"I'm not hungry. I think I ate yesterday."

"You'll die sooner or later."

"That would be a blessing."

"That doesn't sound like you. I think the fever has gone to your head."

Shinya innocently reached out to put the back of his hand against her forehead. Kumiko roughly caught his hand—and time stood still.

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Presently, she whispered, "Don't be so forward."

She pushed his hand away and then gave in to another coughing fit.

"Well, I brought you some home-cooked rice with vegetables. Please eat this." Shinya cleared his throat and took a Tupperware container out of the paper bag.

Kumiko looked at him warily, like a cat.

"Rice cooked with vegetables? Did your mother cook it?"

"Yes. It's one of my sister's favorite dishes, and she cooked so much we had leftovers."

"I don't want it."

"Don't be so polite. It's pretty good."

"I said I don't want it."

"Why not?"

"Because I said so."

Kumiko waved him away, knocking the container he held out to her onto the tatami. She took refuge under the blanket, and he could barely hear her say, "I'm sorry."

Shinya sighed. "Actually, I cooked it, hoping you would eat some. Won't you taste it, since I made it specially for you?"

"Liar," Kumiko said, half poking her head out from under the blanket.

"No, I swear, it's true."

"Then tell me how you made it."

"Let me see. Here's the recipe. You soak the rice in the water used to soak shiitake mushrooms or kelp. You chop the vegetables into identically-sized pieces so they will be flavored evenly. Then you put them in with the rice, add the right amount of water and seasonings, and switch on the rice cooker."

He answered smoothly and without pause for thought. Actually, he didn't mind cooking. It would be too much trouble to cook every day, so he left that to his mother. But occasionally he enjoyed making a simple dish.

Kumiko sat up. "I guess I believe you."

"Look, I even brought chopsticks."

"Come on, even I have chopsticks here."

"What about a fork?"

"Well, what about it? . . ."

Shinya congratulated himself on remembering to bring a can opener. He used it to open the can of peaches. Kumiko opened the disposable chopsticks he had brought and was eating small, bird-like mouthfuls of the rice dish. Shinya glanced at her, and then went to the kitchen to get something to put the peaches in. He took a dish from the dish drainer—a large dish, the kind you'd eat curry from. It was too large, but it would have to do, because he didn't see any other dishes. He emptied the can of peaches into it.

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"How's it taste?"

"You'll make a good husband."

"Would you like anything else?"

"A beer."

"Don't be silly. I'll go buy you a sports drink and some vegetable juice later."

"Make it the kind with fruit juice, okay?"

"Sure, of course."

"And could you water the plants?"

Shinya handed the dish of peaches to his demanding patient and went to open the window. He noticed that the room was stuffy. It would be good to let in some fresh air.

All of the four improbably-named pots—Father, Mother, Boy, and Girl—had sprouted seedlings with tiny leaf buds shaped like butterflies.

He didn't expect her to have a watering can, so he filled a cup from the dish drainer with water and watered the plants, taking care not to spill a drop.

"Which one has grown the most?" Kumiko asked.

"I can't tell. There doesn't seem to be much difference."

"Do any have permanent leaves?"

"Um . . . maybe one has the bud of a permanent leaf. It's on the 'Girl' plant."

"Hmm. . . . How's your sister?" she asked, suddenly changing direction.

"She's back from the hospital, with my niece."

"So she had a girl. What's her name?"

"They're still thinking about it. They can't decide between Asami for morning glory and Aoi for hollyhock, so they're playing 'Eenie, meenie, minie, moe.' But whenever they settle on one, then the other starts sounding better."

Kumiko barely chuckled. Maybe it was because of the fever. "Oh, you mean like 'Whatever the gods in heaven say'?"

"Yes, but my sister's husband is from Nara, so there they call it 'Whatever Buddha says.'"

This made quite a hit. "That's so local." She laughed through another coughing fit.

"But don't you find it strange? The 'gods in heaven' chant is exactly twenty-two syllables, so whenever you're deciding between only two choices, you know that you can't possibly end up with the one you start with."

"I've never thought it through like that."

"Even if you didn't count ahead, after chanting it a couple of times, you ought to realize how it was going to work out. Maybe people use this chant because they have already decided unconsciously on the second choice. So they start the chant with the one they don't want

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to pick. This way, they can have divine will validate their choice."

". . . Have you ever been told you're obnoxious?" Kumiko frowned as she ate a slice of peach.

"Why?"

"You're just too logical. I bet girls don't like you."

"Don't go there," Shinya cautioned. "Besides, I'm planning to major in psychology."

"Okay, but even using that chant, your sister is still unable to make up her mind."

"Well, you've got me there."

"People's choices aren't logical," Kumiko said with a sigh, and added nothing further.

As he went to leave her, Kumiko sat up in the formal position, with her legs tucked under her. Like a well-behaved child, she raised one hand to her chest in a prayerful pose.

"Thank you very much."

"It was no trouble. But, remember, it's customary to repay kindnesses twice-fold, you know."

". . . You devil."

"Yes, yes. Go to sleep and get well soon so you can repay me."

Shinya laughed as he closed the door. Kumiko was easier to deal with when she was sick.

3.

"Ms. Suō."

When he called out to her, Kumiko glanced back and stared at him, wide-eyed. She turned around to face him and stood as tall as she could. She was simply dressed, as usual, in stretch jeans and a light blue shirt. She wore no accessories and used almost no makeup. He spoke before she could say anything.

"I went to school today. I'm telling the truth. I'm on my way home."

Of course, he had been waiting secretly for two hours at the McDonald's across the street, hoping that she would come out of the building where she had her office.

"Oh yes. You did say that your school was nearby."

Her response was flat, perhaps because he hadn't let her speak first. It was two weeks since she'd gotten over her cold. She must have had a lot of work to catch up on because she was hardly ever at Shōraisō.

"I still haven't repaid you, have I?" Kumiko said.

"I'm still waiting."

"You're a tactless kid, aren't you? All right. I'll treat you to whatever you want to eat."

"Are you finished with work?"

"Yes, finished for today."

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"Let's go to one more place."

Shinya was starting to feel that she was punishing him with kindness. She treated him to supper. Then, she also took him to his first bar, but since he was a minor, she insisted that he drink only colas and iced tea while she downed one drink after another. As he guided Kumiko, in a happily drunken state, through streets crowded with weekend revelers, he had his feet trampled so many times he was already tired of partying.

"It's about time to go home."

"No, let's drink some more."

"I haven't been drinking at all, you know."

"Ha, if you haven't been drinking, then you should still be ready to party."

There was no way to keep this conversation going.

"Oh no," she remembered, "I haven't watered the morning glories today." Her words were slurred and almost incoherent.

"You haven't?"

"Will they die if I miss one day of watering?"

He knew nothing about growing morning glories, but he said, "Yes, yes. They'll wilt. They absolutely will. So we need to go home."

She answered, "Do you think so? Then that's great. I won't go home."

She didn't make sense to him.

Kumiko swayed. Flustered, Shinya grabbed her elbow to steady her. Then she put her other hand on his.

"I don't want to go home. . . . It's all right, isn't it?" she said with a sweet-sounding sigh.

His entire body felt heavy, like a sea sponge. *No*, he thought, *that's not right. It should be like a sponge soaked with water.* He was sleep-deprived and only nonsense drifted through his head.

He had thought staying out all night would be sexier than this. When she had suggested it, Kumiko had looked up at him, a melting expression in her big brown eyes. She had never looked at him like that before. And he'd felt excited in spite of himself. He didn't want her to know how he felt, so he nodded in agreement. He had no idea that he was agreeing to go on an all-night binge of karaoke singing. What's more, when they got to the club, she announced that she wanted to sing theme songs from old cartoon programs that Shinya had never heard of. Finally, to fight back, he sang a slew of schmaltzy Japanese-style popular songs. It was a pointless battle. How irritating to feel so pushed around.

Although he felt like snapping at her, he saw Kumiko safely back to her room, still drunk after this all-nighter. Shinya decided to drag himself back to his house.

He was just about to cross the bridge when someone behind him

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called his name. He turned and picked some leaves of grass as he looked behind him. He pretended to make a grass whistle in an effort to hide his agitation and his swollen eyes.

Fortunately, the man behind him was also exhausted. Drooping eyelids half hid his father's intense, sarcastic eyes. His hair was a mess, his face unshaven, and his classical good looks had deserted him.

Whenever Shinya's female classmates called him at home, they always wanted to know who the man with the sexy, low voice was.

Now the voice said, "You look sleepy."

"So do you."

"I've been editing proofs all night."

"Your hours are irregular, as always."

"It's mostly responding to man-made disasters," he said, yawning. "Some author claimed he'd mistaken his deadline by two weeks."

"Should you be deriding your source of income?"

"When an author always mistakes the due date, I end up feeling very annoyed. If it's a genuine mistake, why don't they ever think the deadline is two weeks earlier? That would make the production process go much more smoothly for everybody involved."

"Didn't you tell your author that?"

"As one with dependents to support, I can't say that to my source of income. I'm just hoping you become financially independent soon."

"If you hurt the feelings of this sensitive student suffering from exam-rejection, I might become a derelict."

"Keep saying that. I've never known anyone who announced that he was turning into a derelict who actually became one. . . . And you, have you been out studying all night?"

"Something like that."

Shinya couldn't possibly admit that he'd been out all night singing karaoke with some woman.

When he'd first rented the room, he'd always gone home to sleep. But now that it was warm enough to sleep with just a light blanket, he often slept over in the apartment when he stayed up late. Returning this late (or this early) didn't raise any suspicion.

"It's better not to stay up all night. You feel self-satisfied because you feel tired, but in fact it's not very effective."

"You should talk. You stayed up all night, didn't you?"

"The printer's deadline was nine o'clock this morning. There was no time to worry about efficacy. You're not under that much pressure yet, are you?"

"That's true."

"I won't object if you want to take another year to study for your exams—that is, if you really like to study."

"Why, you're so kind."

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"No need to thank me. Anything I spend on you after you reach twenty, I'll consider a loan."

Shinya's father, an editor at a publishing company, was always sharp-tongued. He said that he was more circumspect at work. But Shinya wondered whether he didn't disparage his authors, and whether he would one day anger them into assaulting him in a dark alley. If he were stabbed, it wouldn't be a laughing matter, but if he were only beaten up a little, Shinya would be able to appreciate it.

"Are you satisfied with your granddaughter's name?" Shinya thought to ask as they reached the gate to the house.

"Yes . . . especially since Buson's haiku about morning glories is so dazzling." He said this seriously, without a trace of sarcasm.

It confused Shinya to think his dad was both disagreeable and an unrepentant romantic.

"And what about you?" He stopped when he asked Shinya this question. "When your sister goes home, are you going to give up your apartment?"

"I don't know. I've gotten used to studying this way."

"If it really helps you concentrate on studying, I don't mind."

"I wonder. Won't it bother you, absorbing the brunt of Mom's bad temper once Sis leaves?"

"Don't be silly."

Gazing into the face of this man, a man of whom people said "he looks best when he's angry," Shinya wondered if he, too, looked that way to others. He still hadn't figured out what parts of him were like his father.

"Well, I'll think it over," Shinya said with intentional arrogance. Then, grinning, he stepped to the side to let his father precede him through the gate.

As he passed in front of him, Shinya's father took a parting shot. "Don't say too much to your mom this morning. She'll wonder why you have such a hoarse voice if you've only been up all night studying."

Damn this man, Shinya thought.

His father opened the front door and stood stock-still. Wondering why, Shinya peered around him to see a man seated on the riser leading into the house. The visitor looked to be in his early thirties and was wearing a polo shirt. His manner was so stiff and earnest that Shinya thought if he tapped him, he would give off a metallic echo. Shinya didn't think he knew him, but he felt he had seen him somewhere. His eyes were bleary with fatigue. Clearly he hadn't had any sleep. This morning their neighborhood seemed to be filled with people who had stayed up all night. It was much too early in the morning for a courtesy call, but since his mother was

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kneeling in the entryway, offering him tea, he must be a guest.

When he saw Shinya's father, the man stood up so abruptly that Shinya pulled his father back to protect him from being stabbed by this potentially irate author.

Then the man bowed deeply and said, "Mr. Miura, sir! I'm so sorry. Please forgive me!"

The man did not straighten up.

Shinya's mother reported, with a troubled look, "I asked him to come inside and wait for you, but he insisted on waiting here."

"Please, Mr. Mineo, don't. It is I who should be congratulating you, sir."

It was extremely rare for his father to sound so deferential.

"Please don't treat me so formally. If you hadn't been there for us, I don't know what would have happened to my wife or me. . . . And yet I acted so abominably."

This visitor named Mineo seemed to be very excitable, and he was all choked up. As he went on talking and thanking and apologizing, despite his father's reassurances, Shinya was able to piece together the situation.

Mineo was the son of an alumnus of Shinya's father's university. When Shinya's father had been at university, Mineo's father had befriended him in some way. For some reason, this situation had inspired Mineo, a budding novelist, to take his manuscript to Shinya's father's firm.

(". . . You read my manuscript so carefully, just because I was the son of someone who had been ahead of you in college. . . ."

"No, no. I'm not that soft. I read it over because instinct told me there was something there."

". . . But you worked with me and instructed me, like a partner in a three-legged race. . . .")

Evidently, Shinya's father had polished Mineo's manuscript, which was raw and immature in places. Then, just when Mineo's prospects brightened and his novel looked as if it would be published, his wife, who'd been supporting him, fell ill. Without her income, and with the added expense of medical treatment, their financial situation soon became desperate. Mineo's parents were no longer living, and as Mineo's marriage had practically been an elopement, the young couple could not turn to her parents.

Mineo's long apologia continued.

"At that point, sir, you gave us a substantial amount of money. As a struggling writer, I should never have presumed on your kindness, but we were desperate."

"Not at all. . . . When I ran out of money, your late father would always treat me to dinner. And your book was scheduled to be published soon."

The publication of the book was suddenly put off indefinitely,

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however, due to problems at the company. This was not unusual at a small publisher like the one Shinya's father worked for, but for Mineo, it was a life-or-death matter.

"That's what I can't excuse. Even though I knew the delay wasn't your fault, I let my emotions overtake me. I said some terrible things to you, the man to whom I owe so much."

"Don't think about it that way. I was embarrassed by my company's decision, and I didn't think that you were out of line, given what you were going through."

Mineo engineered this unpleasant parting. Then, all the while ruing his misfortune, Mineo was forced to look for a job. Just before he started looking, he submitted his novel to a famous literary competition. He felt almost the way a destitute person feels when he buys a lottery ticket. And he also wanted to show the publisher Shinya's father worked for that the company had made a mistake. Mineo was unable to find a decent job, and at just about the time that he could no longer make ends meet doing odd jobs here and there, he heard the surprising news that he had won the prize.

"When I heard the news I realized for the first time how ungrateful I'd been. I shouldn't have submitted the manuscript to another publisher on my own."

"Don't be silly. The company made a mistake in delaying publication indefinitely. It was your manuscript to do with as you wished."

"Not at all! It was only because of your help that the manuscript was finished and presentable. You spared no pain in reworking my manuscript to improve it. It was hard to go through, but I really enjoyed the time we spent together working on it. . . ."

In the end, the author started sobbing violently.

And Shinya had finally recalled why he looked familiar. This was Mineo Hidenori, the writer who had received the prestigious Newcomer's Prize for his first novel two months ago. He had seen an article with the author's photograph. The interview conveyed the impression that the young author was unsophisticated, but the photograph hadn't revealed how emotional he was.

Shinya's father, who disliked such emotional displays, seemed uncomfortable. He stood watching the sobbing author. Shinya could tell from his posture that his father felt uneasy.

When was it that his father had told him that there was nothing better than seeing a manuscript he'd worked on turn out to be a good book? It had been a long time since Shinya had begun avoiding this type of conversation with his father.

"I didn't feel that I could return the money I owed you because I felt it wouldn't make up for my sins. Here . . ." Still sobbing—it was rare to see someone who was not a child so consumed with crying—Mineo took an envelope and a floppy disk from his shoulder bag. "Here is the money I owe you. And if you can forgive me, I

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should like to have the novel on this diskette published by Ryokuinsha." This was the name of Shinya's father's company. "It is topical now, so it should sell quite well."

His father, in a voice filled with regret, said, "That's not a good idea. Your first novel written after the award should be published by Taiyōsha, the company that sponsors the award."

"No! . . . I mean, yes, I'm aware of that. But I wanted my next novel to come from your publisher as soon as possible. That's the least I can do to make amends. During the past two months I've written two novels. I'll take the other one to Taiyōsha. I'm confident that both are equally good."

"Well, I'm impressed. I didn't realize that you were such a fast writer."

Shinya saw that his father could choose his words carefully when he was dealing with work-related matters. But Shinya understood that his father really meant, "Yet, you write so slowly."

Mineo smiled through his tear-stained face. "Somehow, when you're under enough pressure, you can get it done."

So that was it. Shinya now understood the situation. Mineo had worked late into last night finishing up the novel and had brought it to Shinya's father first thing in the morning.

His father politely received both the envelope and disk.

"I'll read it right away. And we'll be happy to publish it as soon as possible."

"But knowing you, Mr. Miura, you won't give it the go-ahead sign until you're satisfied with it."

"Of course not. Please prepare yourself for several revisions."

The author laughed and then started crying again. Shinya was surprised to see that his mother, sitting still on the floor, was also weeping. To top it all off, deeper inside the house the baby started crying.

What commotion, Shinya thought, feeling very lighthearted.

4.

The *noren** curtain hung down to his knees. It was becoming unbearably hot and humid in Kumiko's second-floor apartment, with no cross breeze and no air conditioning. The humorous phrase "pushing against a *noren,*" which means to waste your effort, was printed across the navy blue curtain.

Shinya knocked on the door, which was wide open.

"What do you want?" came the surly reply.

"Am I not to come by unless I have some business?"

"If you don't have any business, then you wouldn't come by, would you?"

"It's not okay if I come by just because I want to see you?" he

* A split doorway curtain that provides privacy while allowing air to circulate.

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asked recklessly.

After a while she answered, "If you have so much time to kid around, shouldn't you be studying?"

"I'll make you some tea."

"Well, in that case, all right."

Given permission to enter, he slipped off his sandals.

Kumiko had on an orange tank top and beige shorts that exposed three-quarters of her body. She was drawing a picture, as usual. Her sketchbook was propped up, making it impossible to see what the drawing was.

Shinya stood in the kitchen and asked, "What would you like?"

"Black tea."

"Shall I make it iced?"

"Hot."

"In this heat?"

"On a hot day, it is more effective to drink something hot and perspire to lower your body temperature."

"Really?"

He was afraid that he might have to go out and buy some tea, but fortunately he found some tea bags on a shelf. He used the only mug in the drying rack for Kumiko and selected a handleless teacup for himself.

Kumiko said she didn't take sugar, so he carried the tea-filled cups over to her. He placed her mug on the low table in front of her. Then he moved away and sat on the window sill.

"What's been happening?"

"Nothing."

He felt like keeping distance between them. Kumiko's slim shoulders and legs looked very white and smooth.

"Have you lost weight?" he asked.

"I haven't had enough sleep."

"You're pushing yourself too hard."

"On what?" She looked up to glare at him.

"I don't know."

Their conversation seemed to be going nowhere. Shinya shifted position and turned the other way.

"I seem to have insomnia. I've gotten some medicine for it."

"Does it work?"

"I don't want to rely on something that's not natural."

"That sounds inconsistent." He laughed and then turned his head. The pots of plants with the strange names had stakes stuck in them. The vines were vigorously growing up the poles.

"They've gotten so big," he noted.

"Do you think that they'll bloom soon?"

"Let me see. There are a few small buds."

"Which pot will be first?"

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"I can't tell."

She traced a light blue pencil sideways back and forth across her paper and spoke harshly again. "You were saying before that even if it seems that one is undecided, unconsciously one may already have decided."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"That's irresponsible of you." Kumiko frowned, and lines formed between her eyebrows.

"We were talking about playing 'Eenie, meenie, minie, moe' to decide on a name, weren't we?"

"So, you do remember. That's what made me think of it. I may think that I'm interested in which plant will bloom first, but I may be hoping unconsciously that this one or that one will bloom first. And if so, I may be treating that plant slightly differently from the others. That would make the competition unfair."

"That could be true psychologically, I suppose. Are you that compulsive about which plant blooms first?" he replied in amazement, thinking to himself that she didn't seem intent on caring for them.

Kumiko frowned again. "I have my reasons." She then took a dark blue pencil and said, "The flowers should be blue because those are the seeds I bought," as she began to rub the pencil across the sketch paper.

"Do you like blue?"

" 'Morning glory/a single circle the color/of a deep pool.' Don't you know it? It's a famous haiku poem by Buson about the morning glory."

". . . 'The morning glory/has taken my well-bucket/I go to borrow water' is actually better known," Shinya retorted, feeling angry.

"But I don't like that haiku. I can't see how you could not notice that a well-bucket you use every day had been overtaken by a morning glory vine. It's disingenuous. It's so obvious in saying, 'Aren't I kind?' "

"Perhaps the poet Chiyojo had been away from home for a while."

Kumiko stopped drawing, and she sat deep in thought.

"Well, if you can confirm that she continued to borrow water from her neighbor until the morning glory finished blooming and withered, I'll take back what I said."

"I don't think it's possible to confirm that."

He didn't feel as interested as he usually did when they bantered back and forth. Then, he let slip what had happened.

"That reminds me, they chose 'Asami' for my niece's name after all. In the end, her grandpa got his wish."

"Oh," Kumiko said, without interest. She said nothing more.

There was a long pause. Shinya couldn't keep his mind from racing.

"There was a man here yesterday, wasn't there?"

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Kumiko looked up so quickly he almost heard a snap.

"Weren't you at school?"

"Is that what you thought? Actually I was in my room."

Strictly speaking, this was a lie. He had returned from school early and had only seen the man from the back as he had left. Yet it was such a disagreeable sight that it had extinguished all the lightheartedness he'd been feeling. Shinya continued the lie, as if to share the negative feelings that had overtaken him.

"Do you know that I can tell what is going on up here when I'm down below?"

Suddenly Kumiko became wary. "What are you trying to say?" She tucked her legs under herself in an uncomfortable formal sitting position. Shinya noticed that all at once he was facing her across the low table.

"He seemed like a middle-aged guy. Are men who have a wife and children that good?"

"What kind of ugly suggestion are you making? Anyway, you wouldn't know; you're just a kid."

Kumiko looked at him with an expression of anger mixed with threat. Shinya placed his hands on the table and pushed himself to his knees.

"Even if I'm just a kid, you and I are closer in age than you and he are. Isn't that true?"

He couldn't recall the order in which things happened next. He flung the table aside and grabbed her shoulders. She let out a small, sharp scream.

When he came to himself again, he had pushed her down onto the tatami. One of the straps on her tank top had slipped, partly exposing the edge of her breast. His heart was beating wildly, as if it might burst out of his rib cage.

What was he to do now?

Kumiko turned her face to the side and closed her eyes tightly. Her lips were moving, and he was afraid that she might scream. But her voice was faint.

"Don't make me feel contempt for you."

He felt himself grow hot. "I'm the one who has contempt for you," he replied, his voice hoarse as well.

Kumiko kept her eyes closed and said nothing more. When Shinya put his sweaty hand on the hem of her tank top, he heard the rustle of paper. Kumiko had grabbed her sketchbook, which had also fallen onto the floor. Shinya glanced at it and saw the drawing on the page—the figure of a youth in a light blue shirt and jeans—a figure that had been Shinya just a few minutes before.

The figure in the drawing was so relaxed that Shinya felt like crying. He let go of Kumiko's fragile shoulders and stood up

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unsteadily. He turned and looked back as he fled from the room, and he saw that Kumiko was still lying where he'd left her. He thought he saw tears in her eyes.

He didn't want anyone else to see her like this, so he selfishly closed the door on his way out. The door felt heavy. He wondered if he had the strength to open it again. He put his hand on the doorknob, but didn't have the courage to turn it.

5.

The stairs to the second floor looked steep and insurmountable. Yet he felt he must climb them. Several days had passed since the incident. If Shinya didn't go to apologize, he was sure Kumiko would remember him as an animal for the rest of her life. She wouldn't just detest him, she would be disgusted by him, as if he were something repulsive. It was frightening to imagine her beautiful face contorted with disgust every time she thought of him.

Shinya stood in front of the sea-blue *noren* feeling like a grade-school kid waiting to be scolded. He knocked timidly on her door.

"I've been waiting for you."

When he heard this, he wondered if she had mistaken him for someone else. Feeling painfully insecure, he poked only his head through the *noren,* so that she could see clearly who it was.

Kumiko was sitting on the window sill with the potted plants behind her. One of the plants was on the low table. A withered blossom still hung from the plant.

"I've been wondering how many days it would take before you felt like apologizing."

Kumiko kept her hands clasped behind her head and gestured toward the corner of the room, indicating that he should sit far away from her. The day was hot, yet Kumiko wore jeans and a long-sleeved shirt buttoned to the top. Her face was the only skin exposed.

Shinya wished he could shrink. He moved to sit in the corner. He put his hands on his knees and lowered his head.

"I'm sorry for the other day. But I really have feelings for you—"

She whipped out her response. "Don't joke with me."

Shinya bit his lip. She was not the kind of woman who would permit him to tell her how he felt after what he had said and done.

Kumiko stood up gracefully and walked weightlessly to the kitchen. She seemed to ignore his presence. He heard the sounds of water running, filling the kettle, and of the stove being turned on.

"Um . . . don't bother about me."

"Shut up." Another curt response to counter his hesitant effort.

Kumiko returned. Shinya, his head still bowed, saw a tea cup placed on the tatami directly in front of him. The sweet fragrance of milk tea drifted up from the pale liquid in the cup. As she walked away, he could see that blue socks completely covered her

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feet. Shinya felt like crying.

"You said you had contempt for me, didn't you?" she said.

"Oh, that . . . I didn't mean it."

"Are you the type who says things that you don't mean?"

He was powerless to counter her ridicule.

"It's not like you to be involved in a shabby affair with a married man."

"Not like me? What do you know about what is and isn't like me? Don't say such irresponsible things. You don't know me well enough to know what I'm like."

"I know that much about you because I love you."

He could tell that Kumiko was at a loss for words. Shinya felt some satisfaction at being able to shock her after all that had happened.

"You've misunderstood everything," she said, calm again. "I'm not having an affair with him. I just happened to fall for a man with a wife and children. Then I came to hate him of my own accord. . . . Hey, drink up."

He looked up and saw that Kumiko was sipping from her mug. She must be drinking the same thing. Shinya gingerly sipped his milk tea. It wasn't very hot because she had added a lot of milk to the tea. She must have put in a lot of sugar, too. He found it too sweet for his taste.

"You said such a shabby thing wasn't like me, didn't you? Well, I'll tell you something. The reason I moved here was because I wanted to kill someone in his family and destroy his household."

Was this the way a bomb was dropped, so nonchalantly? Shinya's hand quivered ever so slightly.

"Are you afraid?"

He answered, "No," and drank the milk tea all at once. "I'm not afraid. I couldn't forgive a man who caused you to think such thoughts."

Shinya blushed and looked back at the floor. He had no right to blame anyone. Kumiko continued talking in a strange, flat voice.

"I thought I couldn't control my longing for him or loathing for him unless I killed someone. But I couldn't figure out who it should be. Should I kill him, the one person I hated over anyone else; or should I kill his wife, who had him all to herself; or should I kill his son, who was the center of the happy family he left me for. The morning glories were going to help me decide whom to kill. Like playing 'Eenie, meenie, minie, moe.' I planned to kill the one whose flower bloomed first, like a game of Russian roulette."

Shinya remembered that Kumiko had said, "Growing up quickly means getting closer to death quickly." He remembered how she smiled when she said it and he began to feel afraid.

"But . . . but you couldn't have been thinking of killing someone in earnest."

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"I was in earnest."

"You couldn't have been. 'Cause that night—when we stayed out together—when I said the plants would wither if you didn't go home to water them, you said, then you wouldn't go home. In your heart you must have been thinking that it would be good if the plants died. Then the game would be over."

"You're still so arrogant, deciding that you know all about another person's feelings." Kumiko sighed as if completely exhausted. "Of course I said that. No matter how much I meant it, murder isn't something you can plan and then have no second thoughts. It's been three months since I found this place near his house and started observing his family. I vacillated between thinking it was all so senseless and all so necessary. I wanted to stop the whole thing. I even went to see a psychologist. I wanted someone to stop me."

"Do you know what substitute behavior is?" he asked, using her tactic of introducing a completely unrelated topic.

"Yes, I know that much jargon, Mr. Psychologist."

"If you can't have the real thing, then can't you put up with a substitute? Wouldn't I do?"

"Do you have any pride, kid? Begging to be his substitute."

"If it's for you. And if that will make you forget him."

"I don't like men who have no pride."

She's like ice, Shinya thought, as he rubbed his eyes. He suddenly felt extremely sleepy.

"Besides, the flower has already bloomed—the one on the table there." Her voice was as cold as ice.

"Which plant is it? 'Father' is the man, 'Mother' is his wife, 'Boy' is his son, and 'Girl' must be his daughter."

"No, that's not it." She laughed. "The daughter has left home. She's not involved. *So this isn't about your sister.*"

Shinya looked up and raised his heavy eyelids. He looked Kumiko full in the face for the first time that day.

Kumiko stared back at him; she realized that he understood. They spent a long moment staring into each other's eyes. Then sleepiness overtook him and Shinya closed his eyes again.

"The 'Girl' is myself," Kumiko said. "Because I knew the easiest solution would be for me to die. I thought it would be unfair if I didn't include myself in the game."

Shinya struggled to fight his way back to consciousness. Kumiko—this cold, selfish, violent, yet beautiful being—might die. Incomprehensibly, this was more of a shock to him than the possibility that his father or mother might die.

"Which plant bloomed? You mustn't die. You mustn't . . ."

How much did she hear of what he was barely able to say? He could tell that she had stepped across the tatami and moved closer to him.

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"I'm sorry I didn't say anything. I knew you were his son from the very beginning. I could tell as soon as I saw you on the bridge. I knew I shouldn't get close to you, but I couldn't help it. . . . You know, you look so much like him."

He felt her small hand stroke his cheek with unexpected gentleness.

Sleeping pills. She had gotten them for her insomnia. From a psychologist's clinic. That's why she made milk tea. To disguise the taste. Fragmented thoughts floated around in his head.

—So it was my plant. But that's all right, if that's the way it is. My dying means she'll live. But I wanted to say one thing. I knew about you and my father from the very beginning. I knew, but still . . . Then Shinya lost all consciousness. . . .

Shinya sat facing his sister. They were at a family restaurant near the house. It must have been early spring.

"The old man's having an affair?" he said.

Shinya nearly spit out his coffee. His sister had insisted he meet her here to discuss something she couldn't talk about at home. So this was it.

"I can't believe it. How could anyone be attracted to such a middle-aged bore?"

"That's just your opinion. He's the type young women find attractive."

His sister, who was drinking milk in deference to her pregnant belly, sounded like a middle-aged woman.

"I still don't believe it."

"It's Mom's intuition. She says sometimes he smells like a soap that we don't use at home. Woman's intuition is very powerful about this sort of thing."

"From the smell of soap? Really? Couldn't she be delusional?"

He'd noticed that his mother had started to behave strangely as she entered menopause. It had improved considerably since his sister had moved back and become his mother's confidante. He was grateful to her, but he thought she shouldn't believe everything their mother said. But his sister was insistent.

"That's not all. You remember the elaborately designed New Year's cards that Father's received over the last few years, from before I got married until now? He said they were from a designer he often worked with."

"Yeah, I guess so."

His mother always wanted to see the cards that came to Shinya and his father, saying she wanted to use them as examples for the next year's cards that she would have printed up to send out—though by the next year she was too busy to do anything about it. Shinya did not want to hear his mother's comments on the cards

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girls sent him, so he had refused to let her see them. But his father didn't have that kind of freedom. His cards had to be available to the whole family. And it was true. There had always been an exceptionally beautiful card in purple and red.

He remembered his father talking in his usual gruff way when this card came up for discussion. "It's from one of the designers who work for us. It would be easy for her to make this."

Shinya had asked, "Designers design clothes, don't they? Why would you know her?"

"Ah, there are all kinds of designers," he answered. "Some designers do work like putting clothes on books. So it's really close to editing. They decide where the photographs and illustrations go, what kind of paper to use for the cover, what kind of font to use for the title . . ."

Even though his style was gruff, his father always sounded cheerful when he talked about work. Shinya felt sad when he remembered when he was young and still called his father "Dad."

"Her name was difficult to read, wasn't it?"

"Mom showed me the card. Her name is Suō Kumiko."

His sister picked up a customer survey card on the table and wrote out the characters.

"Really? You read these characters *Suō?*"

"It's the name of a color, a purplish red. I can't understand how your Japanese can be so weak when you read so many books."

"Reading is not as shallow as studying vocabulary for entrance exams."

"Who said that?"

"I just made it up."

". . . Don't scatter the cherry blossoms by failing again next year, okay?"

"No need to worry. I want to go into psychology, which is in the sciences."

This was an empty boast. When he was pressed about his lack of knowledge in mathematics, Shinya had taken to saying, "Psychology is in the humanities." Shinya's image of psychology was that it was hard to categorize, like a bat hanging upside down.

"In any case, apparently this year there was no New Year's card from her. By this time Mother had been looking forward to the card, so she asked, 'I wonder if there was a misfortune in her family?' She said Father's response seemed very nervous. He said something like, 'I haven't had much to do with her recently. I wasn't ever that close to her.'"

"Couldn't Mom be overreacting? Wouldn't you normally think that if New Year's cards stopped coming, the relationship was no longer a close one?"

"Silly," his sister responded condescendingly. "When a woman

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becomes involved with a married man, she no longer feels like sending him a New Year's card. She would make herself crazy imagining his family looking at the card as they sit around the table, warming their feet in the *kotatsu** heater. And the worst possible thing would be to receive a response with all the names of his family members on it."

Shinya vacillated, thinking that she might be right. He wondered if his sister had experienced something similar.

"But I wonder. You really don't have any solid evidence."

"Yes, I do have solid evidence." His sister grew even more serious. "You know Father opened savings accounts for us, right? He closed mine out when I got married. But he still should have the one for you."

"So?"

His father had secretly been saving a few thousand yen at a time. He planned to use these accounts for his children's future. Several years ago, his mother had found the passbooks in his father's desk drawer and had been deeply moved. But once she found out, she said she felt she had to raise her husband's allowance, and that she felt she was the one who was losing out.

"Mom said since Dad had started the savings accounts, she had left them up to him and refused to get involved at all. But when she started feeling suspicious, she checked the passbook."

"Why on earth . . . ?"

"You need money to conduct an affair, don't you?"

"Ah . . . I get it. So?"

"The account was practically empty when there should have been a total of several hundred thousand yen."

". . . Did she say anything to Dad?"

"If she'd felt she could ask him about it, she wouldn't be suffering this much now."

Shinya crossed his arms. It sounded suspicious. Yet it all sounded so vague. When he said that, his sister responded calmly.

"That's why I'm telling you. You should be the one to confirm whether or not it's true."

"What?"

How was it that she had to drag him into this?

"I don't expect you to be as good as a private detective. We can get her office address from the old New Year's cards. I just want you to go there and see what she's like."

"I'm studying for my exams, you know."

"That's no excuse. This is a family crisis."

"Why can't you do it yourself?"

"You can't demand that much from a pregnant woman."

* Under-the-table foot warmer, usually sunk into the floor; its heat is contained by a quilt draped over the laps of those seated at the table.

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No matter what he said, he couldn't get through to his sister, who thought the world revolved around her.

—It was all too real for it to be a dream, he thought, *I must be ruminating about my memories,* as he drifted in and out of sleep. . . . *If I argue too much, she will just scold me again—*

Shinya felt an indescribable sense of loss as his thoughts wafted back and forth.

When he awoke, he was lying with his face pressed against the tatami. His head felt heavy because of the sleeping pills. *I'm still alive,* he thought, as if he were thinking of someone else. He tried to sit up.

He looked around and saw that the stem of the morning glory vine on the table had been cruelly broken off. Its leaves were wilted. Next to the plant was a sheet of paper torn from the sketchbook.

"The plant was 'Girl.' " This was how the letter started, written in identically sized characters like printed lettering. "To use your words, perhaps I was subconsciously hoping that I would be the one to die. But, it doesn't matter anymore. What did you call it, substitute behavior? Since you were so insistent that I not die, I'll let breaking the morning glory substitute for killing myself. Though it's a shame for the morning glory. By the way, the reason your father came the other day was because he noticed that you and I had made contact and he was concerned. He saw the woman who had been in love with him coming home in the morning with his son, so I don't blame him for being worried. We just talked politely, and nothing like what you imagined took place. When I served him some tea, I almost put in some sleeping powder. But it was just a thought, and I couldn't go through with it. I told myself that the flowers hadn't bloomed yet. I wonder now how serious I was about all of this. I don't even know myself.

"I don't think it's unlike me to fall for a man with a wife and children. I don't regret that I loved your father. But trying to kill someone to get closure on my feelings was certainly unlike me. I feel humiliated that I had to be argued out of it by a kid like you. I'll never do anything so foolish again.

"Can I ask you for a favor? Tell the landlord goodbye. I won't be returning, so he can do as he wants with the stuff in my room. And, if you feel like it, it would please me if you would take the rest of the morning glories. They'll only last until the end of summer.

"Thanks for everything. The rice with vegetables, particularly. It tasted good.

"Please turn into a terrific adult, all right?"

What a stubborn way to end it. All along treating me as if I were just a kid.

When Shinya turned the paper over, he saw the sketch she'd

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made of him the other day.

He sat there for a while, tears running down his face.

6.

Shinya stood on the bridge thinking about the three months he'd been able to be close to Kumiko.

When he'd followed his sister's orders, he'd ended up reluctantly spying on this unadorned young woman. She didn't seem to be the type that his father would be supporting. As he watched her from the McDonald's across the street, she looked straight ahead and walked quickly into and out of her office. He began to feel disgusted by what he was doing. He told his sister, "Your suspicions are groundless. I'm taking myself off this case."

Then, when he was jogging and noticed the sassy, spritelike beauty drawing on the riverbank near his house, he was more than surprised. He was curious: He wanted to know why she was there. He couldn't help wondering if maybe she really was having an affair with his father.

He didn't tell his sister about it, but from then on it became part of his daily routine to watch over her from the bridge. He wasn't sure if he watched to get to the truth about the situation and her intentions or if he was content just to be able to stare at her.

Then one day, because of a chance meeting, they became acquainted, grew close, and then parted. No doubt their fate was determined from the moment the drawing blew across his path, fanned by the wind. And now, Shinya held her last picture, in a different form, in his hands.

As Kumiko had vowed, she never again showed up at Shōraisō. But he was surprised that she also cleared out of her office near Shinya's school and moved away. She was thoroughly consistent, as he would have expected her to be. With this realization, Shinya moved beyond his own sadness to being impressed with her strength. If she was still doing work for his father's company, he could find out where she was. But he didn't want to know, because Kumiko would not have wanted him to look for her.

Of course, Shinya's father had not used his savings to set Kumiko up as his mistress. He'd used the money to support that writer. If his father had told anyone he wanted to lend the money to a stranger, he would have had to explain the whole thing and he hadn't wanted to go through that tiresome process. He thought his wife wouldn't notice right away because she didn't involve herself in that savings account. So he had advanced the money without saying anything.

After the sobbing writer had finally left, his father had explained everything. Neither Shinya's mother nor his sister ever told him of their suspicions. Men are no match for women when it comes to feigning ignorance. In the end, his father never knew that he had avoided a family crisis. Since then, his mother had

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dropped all of her suspicions about his father. She was returning to her usual cheerful, easygoing self, and her menopausal symptoms seemed to be lessening. His sister had returned to her husband's house, and seemed to have forgotten all about the troubling task she'd forced on him. She often came back to visit, bringing Asami, and taking home food for supper.

When his sister left, Shinya moved out of Shōraisō and back to his house with the three morning glory plants. They were now on the balcony outside his window, blue flowers in bloom. His father, who must have seen these plants in Kumiko's room, started several times to say something to Shinya, but he never managed it. His father looked depressed, bereft of his usual self-importance. Shinya found it galling that he undoubtedly looked exactly the same. This was a secret that the two men shared; they never told the two women in the family.

One thing Shinya didn't know—when Kumiko had said her love for his father was one-sided, had that been the truth? His uncertainty grew stronger when he saw his father look at the morning glories. At the very least, they must have had a deep connection if it allowed them to share their impressions of Buson's haiku—'a single circle the color of a deep pool.' And maybe it hadn't stopped at that. Perhaps she had told Shinya that there had been no intimate relationship to protect his feelings. Maybe she didn't want him to lose his trust in his father? Or maybe it was something else?

It was probably better not to know. Kumiko had discharged her ambivalence and anger toward his father and then had left. She had chosen a particularly thrilling way to do this, in keeping, no doubt, with her deepest nature. He hoped she would always stay true to that nature. He hoped no man would appear in her life to get in the way of that. He didn't know if he, as one person who had hurt her, had the right to pray for this, but he would always be praying thus every time he thought of her. Most likely his father was doing the same thing.

His view of the riverside was dull now, with her slim figure no longer there. The thing that brought perfect beauty into his world was lost forever.

But he was being overly sentimental. If Kumiko could hear his thoughts, she would ridicule him. *And whenever she ridiculed me, I felt angry.* Shinya cheered himself up this way, and he opened the handkerchief he had used to wrap the ashes of her sketch. The Kumiko who wished that he would turn into a terrific adult would have wanted him to do this. Two months after she had vanished, he'd finally made this decision. He stood on the bridge and threw them into the air. They rode on the wind, and spread out like a flock of black butterflies. Then they slowly drifted down onto the shining surface of the river.

His eighteenth summer was soon to end. ●

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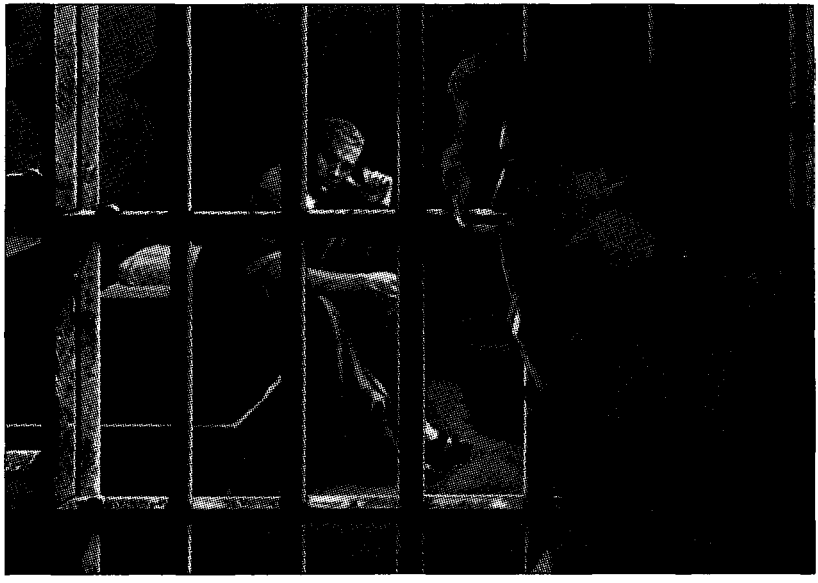

Art by Mark Evans

DEEP LOCK

by Clark Howard

Camille Minden, at the wheel of her ten-year-old Chevy, glanced over at her daughter in the passenger seat. Abby, who was eleven, was working on a temper fit.

"I don't see why I have to spend this weekend with Dad and his Barbie-doll wife! I spent last weekend with them! This is supposed to be my weekend with you!"

Camille had just picked Abby up from St. Catherine of Alexandria parochial school, where she was a headstrong C student in sixth grade. At the moment, they were driving away from San Francisco across the Golden Gate bridge toward Marin County and the upscale community of Delavane, where Brian, Camille's ex-husband, Abby's father, now lived in a half-million-dollar home with a pool and two little boys who looked exactly like their handsome stockbroker father.

"It isn't fair!" Abby seethed. "I never have any fun there! All I end up doing is having to play with those brats! Two weekends in a row! Just tell me why!"

"Honey, I already told you why," Camille said patiently. "We have a high-risk federal transit prisoner being brought in for the week-

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end and all Adjustment Center shift lieutenants are pulling duty. I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do about it."

"Well, why can't you have a regular job, like working in an office or a department store or something? Why do you have to be a San Quentin guard lieutenant, anyway?"

Camille sighed quietly. It was those exact words that had led to the beginning of the end of her marriage to Abby's father. And another relationship she'd had before him. And further back, another one before that. Thank God she'd only had a child with one of them.

One of the most revered short story writers in the genre, Clark Howard recently added to an already long list of honors a 2003 Derringer Award for best long story for "The Mask of Peter" (*EQMM* 4/03), and he is presently nominated for the Barry Award for the same work. The California author is currently in Hawaii doing research for a novel that will employ some of the characters from his Edgar nominated "Challenge the Widow-Maker" (*EQMM* 8/90). ¶

"Sweetheart," Camille said quietly, "I'm a San Quentin corrections officer because that's how things turned out for me. It's a good job and I'm good *at* it. I'm sorry it upsets you."

"But why do you have to work *this* weekend? You worked *last* weekend!"

"I told you, honey. It's because of this high-risk federal prisoner."

"What's so high-risk about him?" Abby demanded to know.

"He's an escape artist. Escaped from federal custody three times. Very embarrassing to the government."

At that explanation, Abby merely rolled her eyes and fell silent.

When they arrived at the Delavane house, the new wife, Cindy, came out to meet them, her two toddlers right behind her. Camille got Abby's backpack out of the trunk.

"You must be roasting in that outfit," Cindy said, referring to Camille's olive drab and khaki uniform. "Hello, Abby."

"Hullo," Abby muttered, not making eye contact.

"The uniform's not so bad, really," Camille said. "It's cool inside the prison. Listen, I really appreciate this, Cindy. I hope it's not too much of an inconvenience."

"I have to tell you, Brian's a little upset about it. We're having a pool party tomorrow night and, well, Abby just kind of sulks around when she doesn't want to be here. Kind of puts a damper on things, you know."

"I've had a talk with her about her attitude," Camille said. "I think you'll find it a lot improved this weekend." She gave her daughter a hug. "Right, sugar?"

"Sure, right," Abby muttered, picking up her backpack and start-

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ing for the house, the two toddlers following right behind her.

"Incidentally," Cindy said, "I guess I should give you a heads-up that Brian's been talking about going back to court and asking for full custody of Abby. He seems to think he's got a pretty good chance of getting it, what with you living in a subsidized apartment in San Francisco, and the kind of people you come into contact with on your job, your erratic hours, Abby having to be with a sitter after school, that sort of thing. You know, compared with what we could give her here."

"But Brian doesn't even enjoy his *weekends* with her, Cindy, for God's sake. Why would he want her all the time?"

"He thinks living with you is what's giving her the poor attitude. He's convinced he could change that. I'm not taking sides, understand. I just thought you should know." Cindy tossed her blond hair and shrugged innocently.

She really did, Camille thought, look like a Barbie doll. Just as Brian looked like a Ken.

Driving back down Highway 101 toward the San Quentin turnoff, it was all Camille could do to keep from feeling sorry for herself. On top of tuition and school uniforms for Abby, rent, groceries, car repairs every month, it seemed, and some female problems she was beginning to experience, now she had to worry about the possibility that her ex might try to take her kid away from her.

Life really sucked sometimes, she thought.

Most of the time, actually.

At that moment, an unmarked sedan arrived at the main entry gate of San Quentin State Prison. The man in the front passenger seat identified himself to the gate guard.

"Special Agent Edward Revere, FBI. We have a high-risk federal prisoner to be housed here until Monday morning. Warden Dixon is expecting us."

The gate guard directed the driver, a United States marshal, where to proceed, and the car was passed through.

"Seems to me you're going to a hell of a lot of trouble, Eddie," said a voice from the rear seat. It belonged to Gerald Fane, who sat squeezed between two other U.S. marshals. Fane, in a federal-prisoner orange jumpsuit, was handcuffed, shackled, and belly-chained.

"No trouble at all, Gerry," Agent Revere replied, glancing over his shoulder at the prisoner.

"You could just as easily have kept me in the federal lockup back in San Francisco. Boarding me out at San Quentin is a waste of taxpayers' money."

"What the hell do you care, Fane?" one of the marshals asked. "You don't pay taxes."

"Shut up, cowboy," Fane replied. "I don't talk to federal mar-

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shals, only FBI agents."

"You'll be talking to San Quentin guards tonight, big shot," the other marshal smirked. "You'll be in the A.C.—San Quentin's Adjustment Center—with the worst psychos in California."

"This is cruel and unusual punishment, Eddie," Fane said to the FBI agent. "I'm a federal bank robber and a federal prison escapee; I'm entitled to be incarcerated in a federal lockup."

"You brought it all on yourself, Gerry," the agent reminded him. "If you hadn't already escaped from three federal lockups, this wouldn't be happening."

The marshal driving the car glanced curiously at Agent Revere. "You two guys seem to be pretty friendly, first names and all. What's with that?"

"Gerry and I go back a long way," Revere said. "Went to Calhoun Elementary back in Chicago. Then to Crane Tech High. Used to box in the Police Athletic League together. Later on, we joined the Marine Corps together and served in the same outfit in 'Nam."

"So how come one of you turned out okay and the other didn't?"

From the backseat, Gerry Fane said, "I've often wondered myself what made Eddie go wrong."

"I guess I just didn't get the breaks," Revere said drily.

The driver pulled into a visitor space in front of the Administration Building and a man in civilian clothes and three uniformed corrections officers carrying restraining chains came out to meet them.

"Deputy Warden Fred Shaner," the man in the suit introduced himself. "I'll take your prisoner from here."

"I understood I was to turn him over to Warden Dixon himself," Revere said.

"Warden Dixon was called to Sacramento for a meeting with the Director of Corrections," Shaner said. "But I have the authority to accept the prisoner. You have his transfer-of-custody order?"

Revere hesitated. This was a minor departure from procedure. No big thing, really—except that Gerry Fane had escaped federal custody three times. The least little deviation in procedure started Edward Revere's stomach churning.

"What time is the warden expected back?" Revere asked.

"Not until late, I'm afraid. It's a hundred miles to Sacramento, and sometimes these meetings run long." The deputy warden noticed Revere's uncertainty. "If you have a problem with my taking custody instead of the warden, you can bring him back tomorrow—"

"No, that's not an option," Revere decided quickly. It would mean a drive back into San Francisco, transferring him back into custody there, arranging to keep him under electronic surveillance all night, then starting all over again the next morning. The SAC—Special Agent in Charge—would raise hell. The chief U.S. marshal would throw a fit, the marshals assigned to the escort would piss

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and moan—and it wouldn't help matters at all that Gerry Fane would be enjoying every minute of it. "No, we'll turn him over to you, Deputy Warden," Revere said.

As Fane was being taken out of the car, the marshal he had told to shut up gave him a solid kick in the ankle for his insolence. "Sorry, Fane," he said, "my foot slipped."

Fane bit his lower lip in pain. Revere looked hard at the marshal. "Make sure it doesn't slip again," the agent warned.

The marshals removed their sets of chains from Fane and the San Quentin corrections officers replaced them with a set of their own. "Take him to the A.C.," the deputy warden instructed. "They know where to put him."

Agent Revere and Deputy Warden Shaner exchanged signatures and documents, and then Shaner watched as the federal officers drove back toward the gate.

When the car was out of sight, Shaner turned and threw a casual salute up to Warden Earl Dixon, who was watching from a window of his office.

The Adjustment Center was a prison within a prison. It was a separate high-security, three-story cellhouse that on one side housed a triple-tiered Death Row, and on the other had three tiers of isolation cells for the most volatile and dangerous non-condemned inmates from the prison's general population. At present, the top tier of isolation cells was unoccupied, and it was in the end cell of that tier, the farthest from the steel steps that connected the three levels, that Gerald Fane was put.

Still wearing the orange jumpsuit with FEDERAL PRISONER stenciled on it, still cuffed, shackled, and belly-chained, he sat on a lumpy blue-tick mattress on the wall-mounted bunk and stared straight ahead at nothing. In the corridor outside his cell, a tall, muscular guard lieutenant, tanned and crew-cut, harangued him with an ongoing litany of insults.

"Not such a big-shot now, are you, Fane?" he asked rhetorically. The nametag on his shirt read WOODBURY. Fane ignored him completely. "Big-time bank robber, huh? Big-time escape artist, huh? Well, the word we get in here is that when you go to federal court for sentencing on Monday, the judge is going to bury you with a three-hundred-year sentence so's you'll never take a free step again. And you know where they'll send you? To the new super-max federal joint in Florence, Colorado, where you'll be locked up twenty-three hours a day. You get a twelve-inch black-and-white TV set with two channels, no window so's you'll never see the daylight again, two meals a day at ten and four in your cell, no communication with any other cons, and your toilet flushes automatically every twenty minutes, day and night."

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Fane heard the footsteps of several people coming down the corridor. Presently, four people walked up to his cell, two in civilian suits—one of them Deputy Warden Fred Shaner—and the other two, one a woman, wearing guard-lieutenant uniforms like the officer named Woodbury who was badgering Fane. The older of the two men in suits glanced at Fane, then spoke to Woodbury. "Why haven't this man's chains been removed, Lieutenant?" There was a hint of annoyance in his voice.

"Because of the risk level, Warden. I thought—"

Before Woodbury could finish, the warden turned to his deputy and said, "Get his chains off."

Fred Shaner spoke into a two-way palm radio he carried. "Deputy Warden Shaner to A.C. Control. Rack open Cell AC-30."

When the cell door electronically slid open, the warden nodded brusquely to Woodbury, who immediately entered the cell and with a master shackle key removed the chrome-covered steel chains from Fane's wrists, ankles, and waist. When Woodbury came out of the cell, the warden went in. He stood just inside the open door. Fane did not bother to look up.

"Fane, my name is Earl Dixon. I'm the warden here."

"Congratulations," Fane said, unimpressed, still not looking up.

"My older brother is retired Captain Sam Dixon, of Leavenworth. My nephew is Sergeant Ray Dixon."

Now Fane looked up, his expression becoming keen with interest. He rose to his feet, causing the guards outside to tense. "How are they?" Fane asked.

"Pretty well, considering. My brother has migraines from the head trauma he suffered, but he draws a nice disability pension and does a little security consulting on the side. Mostly, though, he takes his two granddaughters fishing. Wife and daughter-in-law claim he's making tomboys out of them."

Fane smiled slightly. "What about Ray?"

"The knife wounds were superficial except for the one that nicked his lung, but he's fully recovered. Back on the job. Been promoted to sergeant, as I said."

Fane nodded. "I'm glad to hear that they're both okay."

Warden Dixon turned to his four subordinates outside the cell. "You may or may not have heard this yet, but in the Leavenworth riot six years ago, my brother and nephew were among the staff hostages the convicts took. My brother was beaten about the head and suffered a concussion; my nephew was stabbed twice with a homemade shank and one of his lungs collapsed. Both of them would likely have died had it not been for this man here. As you might imagine, because of his reputation he has a great deal of prestige and status on the inside. Even though he was not a participant in the riot, he personally took charge of my brother and

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nephew, took them into his cell and tended their wounds as best he could, and then successfully hid them by lying them on their sides under his bunk and letting his blanket hang down to conceal them. The doctors said later that without Fane's help, neither my brother or nephew would likely have survived."

As the warden was speaking, the woman in the guard lieutenant's uniform was studying Gerald Fane curiously. Her nametag read MINDEN and when Fane looked at her perusing him, he saw a woman with a deeply severe face—long sculpted nose between flared cheekbones, and piercing green eyes. When she saw him returning her scrutiny, she quickly shifted her eyes away.

"Don't lay it on too thick, Warden," Fane said when Dixon finished speaking. "You'll ruin that reputation of mine you mentioned."

"Well, it was necessary for me to bring the matter up," Dixon said. "Apparently the federal officers didn't make a connection between us; if they had, I don't believe you'd be here. But—" he spread his hands in vexation— "you *are* here, and it has put me in a somewhat uneasy position."

"How so?" Fane asked.

"The story of what you did to help my brother and nephew started spreading throughout the inmate population early this morning when word first reached the prison that you were going to be locked down here over the weekend." The warden put his hands in his trousers pockets and casually leaned against the wall. "You know as well as I do, Fane, how the convict mentality works. When something is owed, it's owed. And when it's owed, it has to be paid. Right now, half the inmates in this facility are talking about how I owe you for what you did to help my brother and nephew. And they're already speculating about how I'll go about paying you."

Fane shook his head. "Forget it, Warden. What happened at Leavenworth didn't concern you at all. You don't owe me anything." He sat back down.

The warden shook his head. "You may not think so. And I may not think so. But I've got three thousand cons in this place who probably *do* think so."

"I get it," Fane said. "You need to figure out a way to pay me back so you can save face, right?"

"That's about it," Dixon admitted.

"I suppose letting me escape is out of the question."

The warden merely smiled.

"How about a bottle of Tanqueray gin and a bucket of ice?"

"Regulations don't even permit me to do that for the condemned men I execute."

Fane grinned and said, "I hear you've got four women on Death Row. How about letting me cell with them. We could have recreation together."

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The warden shook his head and Camille Minden had to suppress a smile. "I'm required to keep you in deep lock," Dixon said. "Anyway, they're housed in a different facility."

Fane rested back against the cement wall his bunk was attached to and shrugged. "Why don't we just forget it, Warden? Spread the word around that I said we were even."

"Won't work, Fane. The cons wouldn't buy it. It's important that they *know* I actually did something for you."

"You're really serious about this, aren't you?"

"Totally serious. With your reputation, after what you did for my brother and nephew, the way you're treated while you're here could affect my inmate morale situation for months to come."

Lieutenant Minden stepped forward. "Excuse me, Warden. May I make a suggestion?"

"By all means."

"Since Mr. Fane isn't technically a state prisoner, I don't believe we're bound by Department of Corrections equality-of-treatment regulations. His treatment doesn't have to conform with the treatment of all the other inmates in our population."

"What are you getting at exactly, Lieutenant?"

"What I'm getting at, sir, is that we could make Mr. Fane's short stay here much more comfortable than it would ordinarily be in an A.C. cell. For instance, we could have his cell scrubbed down, a hospital mattress sent down from the infirmary, with clean sheets, a pillow and case, a clean blanket. We could get him a new set of denims, new underwear, new socks, a pair of Death Row house slippers, and let him get out of that grungy federal jumpsuit he's wearing. Let him have a nice hot shower and shampoo. Get him some decent shaving gear, magazines, newspapers. Have his meals sent over from the staff dining hall. Roll a TV set in front of his cell." She paused for effect, then added, "Set him up like that and the word would be all over the institution in three hours."

Warden Dixon tapped his chin with a forefinger. "What do you think, Fred?"

"Works for me," said the deputy warden. "Even the leaders of the Aryan Brotherhood, the Mexican Mafia, and the Black Guerrilla Family won't be able to put you down for that."

"Sir," the lieutenant named Woodbury interjected, "all that sounds very nice, but in my opinion every concession we make to this man decreases our security a notch. This felon has a serious escape record. Treating him like some kind of special guest will send a message to the entire staff that it's all right to relax safeguards on him."

"Woodbury has a point, sir," said the deputy warden. "It wouldn't look very good if *we* lost him."

"Warden," Gerry Fane countered, "I like Lieutenant Minden's idea. It may be the last time I get to enjoy any privileges at all.

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What if I agree that I won't try in any way to escape from your custody? If I give you my personal word—"

"Your *personal word!*" Lieutenant Woodbury scoffed. "You're a career criminal! What good's your personal word?"

"It's as good as yours, mister," Fane retorted, glaring coldly at Woodbury.

Dixon studied his temporary prisoner thoughtfully. Momentarily he then locked eyes with Lieutenant Minden. She was his only female lieutenant, but more than once she had come up with solutions to problems that his male officers had not known how to deal with. Her judgment had never let him down.

"Your personal word, Fane?" the warden asked.

Fane held out his hand. "My personal word, Warden."

The two men shook hands. Lieutenant Minden smiled very slightly. Woodbury looked as if he might become ill.

As the prison officials left, Lieutenant Minden glanced back at Gerald Fane to see if he was looking at her.

He was.

An hour later, two corrections officers removed Fane from his cell and escorted him to the opposite end of the tier to a secure shower cell. Fane worked his feet out of the laceless high-top black shoes and stripped off the orange jumpsuit the feds had kept him wearing for four days. Because they had not provided him with underwear or socks, his crotch was rashed and he had blisters on the heels and ankles of both feet. At forty-four, Fane's body was lean and trim; whether as a convict or fugitive, he religiously exercised and had given up cigarettes two decades earlier. Under extremely close-cropped gray hair, his face was on the cusp of being craggy, but when he was amused, when he smiled or laughed, women usually thought him attractive. On a ledge just outside the shower stall were a folded pair of new dark blue denim trousers, a light blue denim shirt, a set of white briefs, undershirt, and sweat socks, and a pair of gray wool soft slippers that condemned men wore. On a shelf above the ledge, Fane found soap, shampoo, and a towel. *Now,* he thought, *if only the water in this joint is hot . . .*

It was. When he turned on the spray, got under it, and began to lather up, he felt as if he had died and gone to heaven. He even began to hum a jazzy version of "Memphis Blues." Outside the shower-cell door, his two escort guards looked at each other dumbfoundedly.

They let him stay in the shower as long as he wanted to. When he finally felt clean again, he got out, dried, and dressed. The clean, new clothes could not have felt better if they had come from Desmond's in Palm Springs. When he stepped back onto the tier, he was handcuffed and belly-chained, then told to sit on a metal

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folding chair near the cell from which they had taken him. The two officers stood guard on each side of him. Outside the open cell door was a cleaning cart on wheels with a soapy water tub, mops, brushes, and a large plastic dispenser of the chlorine-smelling yellow disinfectant that Fane had smelled in every lockup in which he had ever been. Inside the cell, two trusties were finishing up a thorough blitz cleaning of the cell floor, walls, bunk, sink, and toilet. When they came out and were getting their cleaning cart back in order, they worked slowly and stared in awe at Gerry Fane, a living legend in the criminal community. As Lieutenant Minden had predicted, they would shortly be spreading the word all over the prison about the special treatment Fane was getting.

"Never mind eyeballing this prisoner," one of the guards said. "Finish up and beat it."

As the cleaning men rolled their cart down the tier, another trusty came past them carrying a pillow, fresh bed linen, and two blankets. Behind him came two others carrying a hospital mattress three times as thick as the usual cell mattress. Immediately behind them came Lieutenant Minden, carrying a large paper bag. Fane could not help noticing how nicely her uniform pants fit her hips. She was, he thought, probably twelve or fifteen pounds heavier than she wanted to be, but that, in his mind, was just a female fallacy; most women, he knew, had no idea how good they looked with a few extra pounds.

Lieutenant Minden stood silently as the mattress was put in place and the bunk made up. Then she told the lead trusty, "Stop in the shower cell and pick up an orange jumpsuit and a pair of high-tops. Take the jumpsuit to the laundry to be washed and ironed, and the shoes to the shoe shop to be cleaned up and reconditioned."

"Yes, ma'am," the trusty replied with a half salute.

To the guards, Minden said, "Unchain him and put him in his cell."

When the chains were off and Fane was inside, she unsnapped a radio from her duty belt. "Lieutenant Minden to A.C. Control. Close Cell AC-30." As the cell door slid shut, she told the two guards, "Okay, you guys can go back to the control room now. I'll be along shortly."

After the guards left, Fane held his arms out in a mock pose and smiled. "Here I am: All dressed up and no place to go." Then his expression became serious. "I appreciate this, Lieutenant. There's no way I can really thank you."

"Sure there is," she said. "Be a good boy. Keep your word. Don't screw up my boss." She handed the paper bag through the bars. "Toothpaste, toothbrush, shaving cream, disposable razor, deodorant, a few candy bars, box of crackers, cheese spread, couple of magazines." Fane emptied everything out on his bunk.

"With treatment like this, I might even be rehabilitated."

"Could you?" Camille asked quietly.

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"Could I what?"

"Ever be rehabilitated."

Fane's expression became reflective. He stepped closer to the bars, where she stood. After a moment, he shook his head and replied, "I don't think so. Too much water under too many bridges. Plus, too much time hanging over me. I'd grow old and die behind the walls."

"That's true," Minden said. "I forgot about that aspect of it for a moment."

"But I do have a way out of the life I've led," he confided. "Want to hear about it? Off the record?"

"Sure. If you want to tell me."

"Word of honor that it'll be just between us?"

"Sure. Word of honor. The warden took your word, you can take mine."

Fane bobbed his chin at the metal chair on which he had sat while his cell was being cleaned. "Pull the chair over and sit down," he suggested. "Want a candy bar?"

Camille moved the chair over to face the bars and sat down. "No candy bar, thanks, I'm on a diet."

"Don't tell me you're one of those women who wants to be skinny?"

"Not skinny. Just *skinnier.* Now tell me about your way out."

Fane sat on the end of the bunk and lowered his voice. "Do you know how many bank robberies I've engineered?"

"A lot."

"Thirty-one. I selected them, scoped them out, planned the job, and picked my crew. The banks we hit averaged us between three-eighty and four hundred thousand dollars. My cut was half, because the jobs were mine; the rest of the crew cut up the other half. Thirty-one successful bank robberies—"

"But they weren't all successful," Camille cut in. "You were caught and sent to federal prison twice."

"But," Fane emphasized, "my share of the money was not recovered either of those times. Some of my crew were nailed with some of the money still in their possession—but never me. So when I say *successful* robbery, from my point of view, it means I got away with my share." Pausing, he dropped his voice even lower. "And my share from the thirty-one jobs came to just over six *million.*"

Camille pursed her lips in a silent whistle. Fane felt a little tickle at the base of his spine over the way her lips looked when they were pursed.

"Now here's the trump card: Two-thirds of my take—four million—was always Fed-Exed out of the country to a trust account in my name in a Cayman Island branch bank in a small Central American country—that has no extradition treaty with the U.S."

Fane unwrapped a Snickers bar and took a bite, chewing it with

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a self-satisfied smile and studying the somewhat severe expression of the woman outside the bars. He wondered what that grave face would look like when she was being made love to. The right way.

"So with that money stashed, you were going to start a new life somewhere," Camille said.

"Already have started one," Fane confided. "I have a beachfront home with a dock, a boat, and boat shelter, a beautiful garden with a swimming pool, a custom-made SUV, an international satellite dish—and it's all in a new name with new identity papers. The only thing I don't have is furniture; I've never actually lived in the place, just stayed in a sleeping bag now and then for a few days."

"What'll happen to it now?" Camille asked.

"I'll live in it. Just like I planned."

"You mean you'll escape again?"

"Sure."

She frowned. "But not from here?"

"No. I won't break my word to you."

"You mean to the warden."

"Sure. You. The warden. Whoever. I keep my word."

"There's talk you'll be sent to the new super-max federal prison in Florence, Colorado. They say it's an escape-proof pen."

"There's never been an escape-proof pen *built,"* Fane scoffed, "except maybe Alcatraz—and even that's open to debate. Anyway, they'll never get me to their new super-max joint. I'll be long gone before that happens."

Camille Minden's radio sounded and she answered. After listening for a moment, she said, "Okay, I'll be right down." To Fane she said, "I have to go down to our electronics shop and sign out a TV for you."

Fane stood and leaned both hands through the bars, putting his face close to them. He feigned a dramatic sigh. "What would I ever do without you?"

"Wise-ass," she said, walking away.

As he watched her go, Fane decided that her uniform pants looked as good on her from the rear as they did from the front. Maybe better.

A little while after Camille Minden left, Lieutenant Woodbury came walking down the tier and stopped in front of Fane's cell.

"Comfortable, big shot?" he asked snidely.

Fane looked up from a *Newsweek* he was reading. "Well, it's not the Belaggio, but under the circumstances it'll do."

"You lucked out good, Fane. If it'd been left up to me, you'd be sleeping on the floor in a strip cell."

Putting the magazine aside, Fane rose and faced the bars—not close enough for Woodbury to be able to reach in and grab him. That was an old corrections-officer trick: grab a con and jerk him

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forward to slam his face against the bars, then rip his own uniform shirt open and claim the con grabbed him first.

"Yeah, well, it wasn't left up to you, screw," Fane said flatly. "That pretty lady lieutenant saw to that."

Woodbury scowled. "Listen, scumbag, that pretty lady lieutenant, as you call her, happens to be a close personal friend of mine. You make any kind of a move on her, or say anything out of line, and I'll see to it that between now and Monday morning, something of yours gets broken. Toes, fingers, nose, ear drums, something."

"I wish you'd spoken up earlier, Woodbury," Fane said blandly. "Now you're too late. Lieutenant Minden and I just got engaged—"

Woodbury's arms shot through the bars, but fell four inches short of Fane's face. "You lowlife son of a bitch!"

"Don't get sore, Woodbury." Fane was smiling now. "I was going to ask you to be my best man."

"What the hell's going on here?" a loud female voice said from down the tier. Woodbury pulled his arms back through the bars. Camille Minden stalked up to the cell, her piercing green eyes flashing annoyance. "What are you doing here, Woody? This is my assignment."

"I just walked over to see if you needed any help—"

"How? By reaching into this prisoner's cell?"

Woodbury looked down at his shoes. "I guess I lost it for a second. He made a crack I didn't like—"

"Go back to your own assignment, Woody," she told him sharply. "Don't come around here while this is my watch."

Casting a threatening glance at Fane, the burly lieutenant walked away. As he did, a trusty came up pushing a table on wheels, which held an industrial-model 12-inch black-and-white TV. Dismissing the trusty, Camille attached an extension cord to the TV, plugged it in across the tier, and rolled it as close to the cell bars as she could.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

Fane waved off the question. "It was nothing. Forget it."

"I want to know." Firmly.

"Look, I don't want to start any trouble between people who have to work together."

"I said I want to know." Insistent now.

Fane shrugged resignedly. "He came over here to warn me about my conduct around you. He told me he'd take it very personally if I made any improper comments to you, or tried to touch you in any way. He said you and he were engaged to be married—"

"He said *what?*"

"That you two were engaged. Anyway, what happened was probably my fault. I got a little out of line."

"How?"

"Well, I was surprised, you know? And I said something like,

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'Man, it seems to me that a woman like her could do a lot better than a slug like you.' That's when he grabbed for me." Fane paused, then asked, "He your boyfriend or something?"

"Was," she snapped. "For a short time. Very short."

Fane moved close to the bars. His voice became quiet and gentle. "How the hell did someone like you get into this line of work anyway?"

Camille drew the metal chair over and sat down. "Long story." She glanced down the tier. "Listen, do you smoke?"

"No."

"Well, I do. But I'm not allowed to smoke on my shift." Pulling up her pants leg a little, she removed a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches from the top of her sock. Lighting one, she said, "If I hear anybody coming onto the tier, I'll hand this in to you and you pretend you were smoking it." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Deal?"

"Sure."

After a couple of drags, Camille said, "I was a file clerk for the warden over in Folsom. I married a correctional officer. He later fell for the warden's secretary. She was a really stacked redhead. Eventually they ran away together. The warden was a real nice guy. He and his wife felt sorry for me, so he suggested I let him sponsor me to take correction officer's training. I did and became a C.O. There are quite a few women in corrections today, more than most people realize. As a matter of fact, a woman is now the *warden* of Folsom.

"Anyway, I studied hard, worked hard, and became a good officer. Eventually, the old warden, before he retired, promoted me to sergeant. Later when a lieutenant's position opened up here at Q, I applied for it, made the top of the list on the exams, and was given the job."

"Is that when you started going out with Woodbury?"

"No, that came later. Before that, I married again. Some of the officers here were invited to attend a Rotary Club luncheon where Warden Dixon was the guest of honor. It was down in San Francisco and there were a lot of young guns present from local commerce, industry, banking, so on. I met this guy, Brian Minden, a stockbroker, rising young executive type. It was one of those lust at first sight things. That night we were in bed together, within thirty days we were married, within two months I was pregnant."

For some reason, Fane was surprised. "You have a child?"

"Yes." She blew smoke up toward the ceiling and glanced down the tier. "A daughter. She's eleven going on thirty. My nickname for her is Miss Attitude."

Fane smiled one of his rare genuine smiles and Camille was struck at once by how quickly he became handsome.

Finishing her cigarette, she handed it to him, saying, "Toss this, will you?" He tossed it into the toilet and when he turned back

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around, she had stood up.

"I don't see a wedding band," he said. "What happened to marriage number two?"

"It lasted three years, then, like all my other relationships, it crashed and burned. He's remarried. To a Barbie doll, according to Miss Attitude."

Fane could not help smiling again. "I'll bet Miss Attitude is a lot like her mother."

Camille cloaked a smile of her own. "Let's not get too personal. I've gone way over the line with you already. All you asked me was how I became a prison cop." She tilted her head a fraction. "How'd you become a bank robber?"

"Somebody told me there was big money in it."

"I'm serious. I want to know."

Fane quietly studied her for a moment. It was a question no one had ever asked him before. "Okay," he said then. "Go to one of your computers and pull up my FBI sheet. After you read it, ask me again."

Camille nodded curtly. "I'll do that." She walked away.

"Hey," Fane called.

"What?"

"Is there another name that goes with Minden?"

"Yes, but our rules don't allow us to give inmates our first names. It encourages familiarity."

"Okay. Don't want to break any rules."

She walked a few steps farther, then said over her shoulder, "Camille. My name's Camille."

Later, a food cart was pushed up to his cell and an inmate kitchen steward, supervised by Camille Minden, passed Fane a tray of hot food from the staff dining room. Dismissing the steward, Camille again drew up the metal chair and sat with Fane while he ate.

"Cigarette smoke bother you while you eat?" she asked. He shook his head and Camille got one from her sock and lit up. "Answer a question for me?" she said, exhaling.

"Maybe."

"What made you give Warden Dixon your word you wouldn't try escaping from here?"

"Off the record?" Fane asked, chewing meat loaf. She nodded okay. "Can I trust you?" he wanted to know.

Camille shrugged. "Trust me, don't trust me. It's up to you."

Fane thought about it. Briefly. "I like you, Camille Minden. I like your style. So I'll level with you. I don't have to try to escape from here; I'm going to escape from the federal courthouse on Monday."

Camille's eyebrows went up, almost tantalizingly. "Can you make it?"

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"If everything goes according to plan, I can."

"Will there be any violence?"

Fane looked steadily at her. "I thought you were going to read my FBI sheet."

"I haven't had the privacy to do that yet." Her eyes were as steady as his. "Will there be any violence?"

"Read the FBI sheet."

Camille rose, handed him her cigarette, and walked away.

Fane began to wonder if he had gone too far with her.

When the kitchen steward came to retrieve Fane's supper tray, there was an ordinary guard as the escort. Camille Minden did not return until mid evening. Fane was watching a Western movie on the little TV. Camille turned it off and sat down.

"Okay, I've read your FBI sheet."

"Find any violence?"

"None. Does that mean there won't be any at the courthouse on Monday?"

"It does."

Camille looked at him almost in wonder. "How do you do it? I mean, you've robbed thirty-one banks in twelve states, escaped from federal lockups *and* federal prisons—and all without using violence of any kind. You use weapons, you threaten, you neutralize bank security and prison staff by putting their own handcuffs on them, you probably frighten people half to death—but you never actually *hurt* anybody." She shook her head almost in frustration. "I don't understand why someone like you is even a criminal."

Fane did not say anything. Camille waited for what she determined to be an appropriate pause, then bluntly challenged him.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"You know what," she said impatiently. "Why *are* you a criminal? Why are we sitting here with a rack of bars between us instead of having a drink in some nice cozy lounge out in the free world?"

Fane moved to the end of his bunk nearest the bars and sat leaning forward with his forearms on his knees. "I don't really know," he said quietly. He smiled almost shyly at her. "Nobody's ever asked me that before. Not even Eddie Revere, the FBI agent who brought me here. He and I were once best friends. For years. Went to elementary school together, high school, served in the Marine Corps together in Vietnam. Hell, we even dated the same girl from our old neighborhood for years. Girl named Jenny. We both wrote to her from 'Nam. Started dating her again when we got back. Both of us were crazy about her. She ended up choosing him. I didn't blame her. He was the steady one. Good old steady, ever-ready Eddie. Became a cop in Chicago, went to school nights

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on the GI Bill, ended up joining the FBI. I was just letting the years go by, bouncing from job to job, not really getting anywhere. Then one day I ran into a guy that Eddie and I had known in the service. We had a few drinks together and he told me how things hadn't worked out well for him either after he came home from 'Nam. Couple of divorces, a few jobs lost, lots of debt—that sort of thing. Then he laid it on me that he and another guy were planning to stick up a small branch bank for money to make a new start. And they needed a third guy. So I got to thinking about Eddie and Jenny, happily married, a little girl, another baby on the way, house in the suburbs and all that. And me, my life going nowhere, no future, no family, no nothing. So I said sure, why not."

Fane rose and paced to the rear of the cell and back. He did not like what he was talking about, and Camille could see that in his expression, his body language. She got the feeling that he was almost embarrassed by it all.

"Anyway," Fane continued, "we dumped the bank and got away. It was almost too easy. So we did another one, then another. I began to see little things that we were doing that could be improved on, and before long I was running the show. One thing led to another, and—I don't know, I seemed to have a natural flair for it. By the time I got caught, after the eleventh bank, I had developed into a professional bank robber, a regular Willie Sutton. Naturally, I got sent up for it. I might have been rehabilitated during that first spell in the joint, but I discovered that I had a flair for something else, too: escaping."

He came up to the bars and stood with both hands dangling through them, a look of resignation on his face.

"After the first escape," he said finally, "there was no turning back."

Camille shook her head slowly. "The tricks life plays on us," she said quietly.

"Amen," Fane agreed.

Camille left for a while, but came back later that night. "I'm off shift at midnight," she said. "Anything you need before I go?"

"No, I'm good," Fane said, coming over to the bars. "When do you come back on?"

"Noon tomorrow. Overnight an older officer named Vern Addy will be in charge of you. He's a good guy, not an asshole like Woody." She turned to go, then paused. "Remember the deal."

"Sure."

"See you at noon tomorrow."

"Sure. See you."

Walking away, Camille knew he was watching her. She did not care. Even if she was a few pounds too heavy. Gerry Fane made her feel almost like—well, Barbie.

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When Camille came back on shift the next day at noon, Fane frowned at her through the bars.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" she all but snapped back.

"I mean, there's something wrong with you. What is it?"

"What the hell makes you think something's wrong with me?"

"I can see it in your face."

"You've known me for twenty-four hours," she said in exasperation, "and you think you can read my *face!* Get real!"

"Fine. Then tell me nothing's wrong," Fane challenged.

Camille fell silent. Her shoulders sagged an inch. She looked away down the tier. Fane let the quiet lie between them for a full minute. Then he stepped close to the bars and said quietly, "Tell me."

Camille sighed wearily. "When I got home last night, a process server was waiting for me. My ex is taking me to court to get custody of my daughter." She shook her head dejectedly. "I'm barely making ends meet as it is. Now I've got to hire a lawyer, probably take unpaid time off work—"

"Listen," Fane began, but Camille immediately held up her hand.

"Don't say it," she warned. "Don't even think it."

"I just thought—"

"*Don't* think. Forget it." She paused a beat. "Please."

"Whatever you say," Fane conceded.

At that moment, Camille's hand radio beeped. "Lieutenant Minden," a scratchy voice said, "this is A.C. Control. There's an FBI agent here to see Gerald Fane."

Camille's eyes met Fane's for an instant, both curious. Then she responded, "Escort him up, Control."

Several minutes later, an officer escorted Special Agent Edward Revere down the tier to Cell AC-30. Revere nodded to Camille, then stood looking through the bars at Fane's accommodations.

"Hello, Eddie," said Fane, smiling.

Revere turned to Camille. "I thought," he said coldly, "that this prisoner was going to be kept in deep lock. An isolation cell."

"This *is* an isolation cell," Camille replied, clearly not liking Revere's tone.

"Like hell it is! It looks like some kind of V.I.P. cell!"

"Agent Revere," Camille responded evenly, "this cell, as you can see, is totally isolated; there are no other inmates on the entire tier. The prisoner is monitored every hour around the clock. He has been let out of his cell only once since we received him, to shower, shave, and change out of the filthy jumpsuit you had him in—"

"All that aside, Lieutenant Minden, he is obviously being given some kind of special treatment! You may not be aware of it, but he has an incredible ability to take advantage of the slightest privilege and turn it into an escape device of some kind. I want him

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transferred into a strip cell at once!"

"Agent Revere," Camille said, stepping very close to him, "let me remind you that this is a California state facility in which you have absolutely no authority. You are a visitor here—and *only* a visitor. We have official, written custody of this prisoner until Monday morning at eight o'clock, and we will house him in any manner we wish as long as it is secure. If you'd like to debate this issue further, I'll have you escorted to Deputy Warden Shaner's office and you can take it up with him. I guarantee he'll tell you the same thing that I just did."

Revere did not respond at once. For a long, heavy moment he simply stood there, closely facing the uniformed woman with the deeply severe face, long sculptured nose, flared cheekbones, and piercing green eyes. She did not blink. Revere began to feel as if he were facing a statue.

"Okay, Lieutenant," he said at last. "It's your shop." He looked at Fane through the bars. "Let him have his little vacation. Just make sure you don't get burned." Then he smiled. "Actually, Gerry, I just stopped by to tell you that we arrested a friend of yours last night. Sid Bierko."

Gerry Fane frowned. "Who?"

"Sid Bierko. You worked in the furniture shop with him in Leavenworth."

Fane shrugged. "Maybe. I don't really remember him."

"I suppose," the agent said, "it could be just a coincidence him being in San Francisco this close to your going to court for sentencing." Revere paused and his smile faded. "And maybe it was just a coincidence that he had in his possession a federal handcuff key."

Fane shrugged again. "Means nothing to me, Eddie."

"Good, Gerry." The agent smiled again. "Very good. Glad to hear it won't upset any plans you may have had." Turning back to Camille, he said, "I'm ready to leave now, Lieutenant. Thanks for the hospitality."

"No sweat." Camille radioed down for an escort to take him out.

After Revere was gone, Camille said to Fane, "He ruined your escape plan, didn't he?"

Fane shook his head. "No."

"Yeah, he did. I can see it in your face."

"You've only known me for twenty-four hours and you think you can read my *face?* Get real."

"Look, I leveled with you when you asked what was wrong with me," Camille countered. "But you won't trust me, is that the drill here?"

"Camille, it's a whole different situation with me—"

"No, it isn't, Gerry."

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Suddenly they fell silent, disconcerted, their eyes locked. It was the first time they had addressed each other by their first names, and they both realized it in the same instant. Camille softened first.

"Okay, you're right," she said. "This isn't going to get us anywhere. There's no way we can help each other. No way."

"I didn't ask you to help me," Fane said.

"But you will. You'll have to. You'll ask me to get you a handcuff key."

Fane shook his head. "No, I won't." He held a hand through the bars. "Let me look at your handcuff key."

She was astonished. "You want me to hand you my cuff key? I don't believe this."

"Who's not trusting who now?" he challenged.

Camille stared hard at him, an intensified look she had developed and perfected to use in any serious confrontation with an inmate. Without changing that countenance in any way, she removed her handcuff key from a carrier on her duty belt and held it out to him.

"You're probably thinking I'm going to swallow this, but I'm not," Fane assured her. He studied the oddly shaped chrome key, turning it back and forth, over and back, his fingertips feeling its body for rolls and edges. He hefted it once in his palm, as if weighing it. Then he handed it back to Camille.

"Wouldn't do me any good if I had it," he said easily. "Federal handcuff keys are smaller, not as long, and have two tumbler teeth instead of one."

"There's no way I could give you one anyway," Camille said. "Every key in this place is numbered and kept under strict inventory." She drew the chair over and slumped down in it. "Not a real thrilling day for either of us, is it?"

"I've seen better," Fane allowed. "In a way, we're both in deep lock: you with your ex-husband causing you custody problems, me with a couple hundred years behind the walls hanging over me. Why don't we just run away somewhere together? You, me, and little Miss Attitude."

"I'm game," Camille Minden said glumly.

Fane stared levelly at her.

"Are you?"

Their eyes met and held.

"Are you really?" he asked in a dead-solemn voice.

Later that night, a couple of hours before Camille was to go off shift, she and Fane sat talking quietly in the dimly lighted tier.

"Tell me what's involved," Camille said, her voice tentative.

"Okay. But first you tell me a couple of things. Your little girl: How do you think she would react to leaving her father behind and starting a new life in a foreign country?"

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"I think she'd be all right with it. She's not close to her father, not at all, especially since he's had his two sons." She bit her bottom lip briefly. "But what about school for her?"

"Not a problem. We'd be less than fifty miles from one of the most cosmopolitan cities in Central America. There are bound to be two or three upper-class English-language schools there. We could have an apartment in the city during school term. Go to the beach home on weekends and during the summer."

"Gerry, that would be heaven for her; she *loves* the beach." She caught her breath. "This isn't just a dream, is it? Or a con?"

"No. This is on the level. But I have to ask you about yourself. Can you just drop out? Leave everything behind? And I mean *everything.*"

"To get out of this deep lock?" She nodded grimly. "Yes, I can."

"What about friends? Relatives?"

"I only have a couple of real friends, both here at work. And the older lady who looks after Abby for me. Relatives—there's a sister back in Wisconsin, but we've never been close. I could make a clean break, Gerry, I really could. You'd just have to tell me how."

"It's not difficult. What kind of place you live in now?"

"It's just a one-bedroom furnished apartment."

"Good. You have vacation time coming here?"

"Couple of weeks, yes."

"Okay, make arrangements to take your vacation as soon as you can. Tell your landlord that you and Abby are taking a vacation to Arizona. You have a car?"

"Yes."

"Paid for?"

"Yes."

"Okay, when you get your vacation, pack everything you own and you and Abby drive to Phoenix. Tell your landlord and everybody you work with where you're going. Send postcards when you get there. Check into a motel. Call your ex, tell him where you are. Stay there a few days so he can call Abby and talk to her. Then tell him you're going to drive over into New Mexico for a while. Check out of there and go across town and check into another motel. While you're there, do two things: First, get forms from the post office and apply to the State Department for passports for both of you, using the motel as your address; second, sell your car.

"Next, check out of that motel and fly to Albuquerque. Check into a motel there. Call your landlord and tell him that you won't be returning, that you've decided to settle in New Mexico. Check out of the Albuquerque motel, rent a car, and drive to San Antonio, Texas. Check into the Riverwalk Hotel. Look in the Yellow Pages there and write down the names of several private security firms. Then call your boss here at the prison and tell him you're resign-

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ing. Say you've been hired by a security firm in Phoenix and sent down to Texas for training. Tell him your first assignment is going to be in Albuquerque. Tell him to send your last paycheck to you at the Riverwalk Hotel. Go to the post office and fill out a card having all your mail forwarded from San Francisco to you at the Riverwalk—"

"Gerry, I'll never be able to remember all that," Camille said wearily. "Besides, I don't have the money to do it."

"Get me a pencil and paper before you go off shift tonight and I'll write it all down for you. And I'll see that you get some money."

"But how—?"

"Never mind how. Just keep listening. Okay, where was I? Oh yeah: the Riverwalk. You stay there until you get your last paycheck and all your bills are forwarded. Then use the rented car to drive *back* to Albuquerque. Mail your final bill payments from there, using postal money orders. While you're doing all this, make sure Abby calls your ex every day or so to keep him from getting suspicious. Then, after all your bills are paid and you have no more mail being forwarded to the Riverwalk, call your ex and tell him you and Abby are starting home to San Francisco. Say you'll call him when you get there. Turn in the rented car and go to a different company and rent another one. Drive back to Phoenix to the second motel you stayed in there. Your passports should have arrived by then. Stay there overnight. Drive back to Albuquerque. Turn in the rental car. Take a taxi to the Greyhound depot and take a bus to El Paso. There, rent another car and drive to Houston. Turn the car in there. Take a plane from Houston to Mexico City. Check into the Baristo Hotel on the *zócalo.* It's a nice place, very comfortable. Stay there until you hear from me."

"Hear from you?" Camille frowned in confusion. "How can I hear from you? The FBI agent said they'd busted the guy who was supposed to smuggle the handcuff key to you. I don't understand, Gerry—"

"*You're* going to get me a key."

"But you said the handcuff keys we have here won't work on federal cuffs—"

"They won't. But there's another key that will."

"What key?"

"The key that Villemaine Luggage puts in the suitcases it sells."

Camille looked incredulous. "Villemaine Luggage—"

"It's a French company that makes classy, high-ticket bags for movie stars and crooked politicians. The keys to their luggage will unlock federal handcuffs."

"I can't believe it."

"Believe it."

"And the feds don't know about it?"

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"Not yet."

"So all I have to do is—"

"Go to a luggage shop in the morning, buy the cheapest Villemaine bag they have, and bring me the key when you come on shift tomorrow."

"You're sure it'll work?"

"Positive."

Fane reached through the bars and took Camille's hand.

"One little key," he said softly. "And it'll get both of us out of this deep lock we're in."

Special Agent Edward Revere, accompanied by the same two U.S. marshals who had brought Gerald Fane to San Quentin, came back for him at eight o'clock Monday morning. Fane was given the orange federal-prisoner jumpsuit, now cleaned and pressed, that he had arrived in, as well as the Velcro-fastened shoes with no socks.

"Sorry to make you leave these luxurious accommodations of yours, Gerry," the FBI agent said sarcastically.

"I know it must be breaking your heart, Eddie."

"Take off your clothes for a strip search," one of the marshals ordered. It was the same marshal who had "accidentally" kicked Fane in the ankle when they delivered him.

Fane stood naked in his cell while the marshal, wearing plastic gloves, meticulously searched every inch and orifice of his body, even shining a penlight into his mouth and ears, and having him bend over for a finger probe. Then he was allowed to dress in the orange jumpsuit, and Deputy Warden Shaner transferred custody back to the federal officers.

After a short drive into San Francisco, the prisoner was booked into the federal lockup in the basement of the United States Courthouse, where he was strip-searched for the second time, then given a civilian suit, shirt, necktie, and shoes for his formal court appearance, which was scheduled for two o'clock. Afterwards, he was reshackled, belly-chained, and handcuffed.

He was put alone in an isolation cell to wait his turn on the court docket.

Camille Minden checked into San Quentin later that morning for her regular ten-to-six shift, and was in the Adjustment Center control room at one-fifteen when the telephone rang. It was Deputy Warden Fred Shaner.

"Warden wants us in his office on the double, Camille."

"What's up?" Camille asked.

"Gerald Fane has escaped from the federal courthouse."

When Camille got to Warden Dixon's office, Lieutenants Keith Woodbury and Vern Addy, along with Shaner, were already there.

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At his desk, Earl Dixon's expression was grim.

"You know about Fane's escape?" he asked Camille.

"Yes, sir. Deputy Shaner told me. How did he do it?"

"We don't have any details yet. The alert just came from the Highway Patrol."

Camille shrugged. "We can't be involved. We transferred custody early this morning, didn't we?"

"That's true. But Lieutenant Woodbury here suggests that because of the, ah—extra amenities, shall we say—that were provided while Fane was in our custody, we might have given him something that somehow facilitated his escape. You and Lieutenant Addy were the only two officers in charge of Fane while he was here. Can either of you think of anything we might have inadvertently done that could have aided in his escape?"

Addy shook his head. "Not me, Warden."

"Me either," said Camille. "All we did was make him a little more comfortable."

"You seemed to get pretty friendly with him," Woodbury pointed out.

"That's not true, Woody," she said. "I was cordial to him. I wanted to stay on congenial terms with him to emphasize the agreement he made with Warden Dixon not to try and escape while in *our* custody. He kept his word on that."

"I was on duty when he was transferred this morning, Warden," said Addy. "A complete inventory was taken of everything in his cell. And he was strip-searched by the feds. Nothing left the prison with him."

"The day we received him," Deputy Shaner asked, "after his cell was cleaned by the trusties, did anyone else have access to him?"

Camille and Addy both said no. Then Camille added, "Except Lieutenant Woodbury."

"I didn't have access to him!" Woodbury vehemently denied.

"Not authorized access, no," Camille admitted.

"Exactly what do you mean, Lieutenant Minden?" the warden asked sternly.

"I came onto the tier one time during my shift and found Lieutenant Woodbury at the door of Fane's cell with both arms inside the bars."

Woodbury turned beet red.

"Is that true?" Dixon demanded angrily.

"Well, yes, sir, but that was an isolated incident and—"

"That's enough!" Dixon snapped. He rose from his chair. "I don't know if we're going to be dragged into this escape or not, but I intend to be fully prepared to answer any inquiries if we are. Lieutenants Minden and Addy, you are excused for now; I'll take separate statements from you both later on. Lieutenant Woodbury, I

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want you to remain. Deputy Shaner, get a stenographer in here."

Camille returned to the A.C. control room. Several A.C. officers were listening to news of Fane's escape on a portable radio. Details about the incident were just coming in. Apparently Fane, dressed in street clothes for his court appearance, was being escorted from a federal lockup in the basement of the U.S. Courthouse in order to be in court fifteen minutes before his turn on the sentencing docket. Getting off the elevator on the main floor where the courtroom was located, Fane complained to the two federal marshals escorting him that he had contracted diarrhea from the San Quentin food over the weekend, and urgently needed a bathroom. The marshals, fearing that it would disrupt the courtroom and anger the federal judge if Fane's problem was not alleviated before entering the court, quickly escorted him to an employee restroom in the main-floor corridor. There, his right handcuff was removed, his left hand cuffed to the belly chain around his waist, and he was put into a toilet stall. One marshal remained in the restroom while the second stood outside the corridor door to keep other people out.

"Reports," intoned the news broadcaster, "indicate that Fane somehow managed to unlock not only the handcuff on his left hand, but also both shackles on his ankles. He then flushed the toilet and opened the stall door. Before the marshal inside had time to notice that Fane now had both hands and both feet free of restraints, the prisoner snapped a handcuff onto the officer's right wrist, twisted his arm behind his back, and snatched his revolver from a belt holster. Fane then ordered the marshal to summon his partner. When the second escort officer entered, Fane confronted him with the revolver and relieved him of his own weapon. The notorious bank robber and escape artist then used handcuffs and shackles to chain both officers to the urinal plumbing, and took their own handcuff keys, badges, and wallets. Before departing, for no apparent reason, he viciously kicked one of the marshals in the ankle, saying, 'Hurts, doesn't it?' Then he left the restroom and fled."

In the A.C., San Quentin officers listening to the news were astounded.

"How in hell did he get out of his cuffs and shackles?" Lieutenant Vern Addy asked. "The guy didn't even have a stick of chewing gum on him when he left here this morning. I watched the feds strip-search him myself. They even made him bend over and gave him a finger check. Shined a flashlight up his nose, in his ears, in his mouth. They covered every inch of him!"

Every inch except the false hollow second lower molar on the right side, Camille thought.

The false tooth containing the key to the small Villemaine carry-on bag she had purchased the previous morning.

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Camille could not help feeling elated for the rest of her shift, although she managed to contain any outward expression of her buoyancy.

He did it! was all she could think about. And without any violence—except for that kick in the ankle one of the marshals sustained, and that was certainly not serious.

Now all Camille had to do was wait to hear from him. It would give her time to memorize the meticulous travel instructions he had written down for her. And, too, she had to wait for the money she was going to receive from him for her and Abby's expenses.

Abby was going to love Gerry, Camille was certain of it. Her daughter had lost all feeling for her father and his Barbie wife and her two little half-brothers, whom she had never liked in the first place. Plus, she resented the plush suburban lifestyle that her father provided for his second family while she and Camille barely managed, even with child-support payments, to get by. What Gerry Fane would give them in Central America—the beach home, the boat, the garden and swimming pool, the custom-made SUV, the upscale private school—all that would suit little Miss Attitude just fine.

Me too, for that matter, Camille thought, suppressing a smile.

Later in the day, Camille was again summoned to Warden Dixon's office to give a formal statement on the matter of Gerald Fane's escape.

"Camille, we've been pretty good friends over the years," the warden said before calling in the stenographer and Deputy Shaner to witness her statement. "I want you to level with me on this. Do I have any worries about being implicated in aiding Fane to escape?"

"Not as far as I know, sir," she answered. "I've done nothing to make you vulnerable in any way."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, sir. Positive." Camille knew in her heart that Gerald Fane would not betray her in any way—not even if he got caught. And if Gerry did not betray her, there was no way the warden would ever have to take any heat.

"What about Addy?" Dixon asked.

"As straight as they come, Warden. I'd vouch for Vern Addy all the way."

"And Woodbury?"

Camille hesitated just long enough to give Dixon time to attach an addendum to his question.

"I'll be frank, Camille. Woodbury wasn't exactly supportive of you in his own statement."

"Well," Camille said, sighing, "Woody and I had a personal thing going for a while. It didn't work out. There's been an edge between us ever since. I think he resented my being put in charge of Fane. I

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know, as you do, that he thought we were coddling him with all the perks—and, of course, that had been my suggestion. Fane sensed the tension, I think. He baited Woody, and Woody made a grab for him through the bars—at least, that's the story I got. I don't think it was anything more than a burst of anger. If you want to know whether I think Woody intentionally or negligently did anything to help Fane escape, I'd have to say no. Definitely not."

Dixon sat back in his chair and nodded.

"All right. Thanks for your candor, Camille."

He summoned the stenographer and Deputy Shaner.

When Camille got home that evening, she collected Miss Attitude and they went out for pizza, then to see a Leonardo DiCaprio movie they had already seen twice. Abby had a real thing for Leo, as she referred to him. The walls on her side of the bedroom she shared with her mother were covered with pictures and posters of him. They had only recently replaced photos of Tom Cruise, whom Abby had decided one day was not tall enough for her.

Back home, mother and daughter showered together, scrubbing each other's back, then put on fluffy matching robes and fooled with their hair in front of a mirror they shared. Afterwards, they made hot chocolate with marshmallows, and cuddled up next to each other to watch TV. The first thing that came on was an update on Gerald Fane's escape.

The news anchor said solemnly, "It has now been reported that bank robber Gerald Fane may have had outside help in his sensational escape this afternoon from the San Francisco federal courthouse, where he was due to be sentenced on numerous charges. Two eyewitnesses in the courthouse parking lot told investigators they saw a man matching Fane's description leave the courthouse building by a fire exit and get into a waiting car. The car, unidentified except that it was either black or dark blue, was driven by a female with blond hair, wearing large sunglasses . . ."

"What's the matter, Mom?" Abby suddenly asked her mother.

"Nothing, why?"

"You just got real stiff next to me, and the look on your face got, you know, like, serious."

"It's nothing, baby. I've just got a headache coming on."

"You're not having your period early again, are you?"

"No, baby. Just a headache."

"Probably all those long hours you've been working," Abby declared clinically. "At least you got rid of that high-risk guy, whoever he was."

"Yes, at least I got rid of him," her mother said quietly.

In Camille's head, the news anchor's words were ricocheting like shrapnel: "*. . . may have had outside help . . . blond hair . . .*

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large sunglasses . . . a female . . ."

Camille worried about it for a week. The thought was constantly on her mind: at work, at home, in between, even when her ex telephoned about the custody suit for Abby. "Brian, I can't discuss that right now," she told him. "I have other things on my mind right now, and I've got a raging headache."

"I just don't want to have to take this thing to court if I don't have to, Camille—"

"Take it to court, don't take it to court," she cut him off. "I can't discuss it right now!" She hung up.

Another woman. The thought kept eating at her mind.

Why hadn't he told her there was someone else in on the plan? Had he thought it might prevent her from helping him? That she might be afraid that his starting a new life might be with somebody else?

Or was that story about a new life just a con? Was there really a beach home in Central America, and all the other things that went with it? Or had she simply fallen for a guy who was undeniably one of the smartest, slickest career criminals of his kind?

The whole thing was driving her crazy. She now had less than three weeks before she had to get a lawyer and respond to the summons that had been served on her in the custody suit. If she failed to respond altogether, Brian could go into Domestic Relations court and ask for—and probably *get*—a default judgment awarding him full custody of Abby. Yet Camille was totally unable to focus on that issue.

Why? she asked herself. Guilt? Was that it? Not worry about whether she had been duped by Gerry Fane, but the knowledge of what she had allowed herself to *do?* She had violated the oath of the state she worked for, betrayed the superiors she worked for, peers she worked with, and, worst of all, she had committed a major felony by conspiring with a convicted criminal to help him escape from custody. Not only could she lose her job, she could actually go to prison. *Then* where would Abby be?

Nights, after her daughter was asleep, Camille rose from bed and paced their little living room. What could she do now? What was done was done. She had a choice of riding out her mistake, living with it, hoping for the rest of her life that it never came to light, or going to Warden Dixon and confessing everything.

If she went to Dixon, he would take the matter to the Director of the CDC—the California Department of Corrections. Dixon would have no choice: He would *have* to do it. Maybe the CDC would be lenient, cover it up to keep the department out of a scandal. In that case, she would just be terminated—or even allowed to resign. Then, without a reference, what would she do, where would

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she work, how could she live? And with an unemployed mother, what would happen to Abby?

In the bathroom one night, she splashed cold water on her face to cool down the puffiness of an allergic reaction she was having because of all the stress. As she dried her blotched face, she looked at herself in the mirror and slowly shook her head. What in the hell, she wondered, had even made her suspect that a relationship with Gerry Fane would turn out to be different from any of the other relationships with men in her life? How many times, when she started seeing a man, had she thought: *This could be it, this could be the one*—only to have it crash and burn, leaving her with the ashes of unfulfilled hope—how many times?

"You're a fool," she said to herself in the mirror. "When it comes to men, you've always been a fool."

Several nights later, when Camille parked her car after work and was walking down to her building, a woman stepped out of a shadowy doorway and said, "Camille Minden? May I speak with you, please?"

Startled, Camille stepped away across the sidewalk. "What do you want? Who are you?"

"I'm a friend of the person you're supposed to meet in Mexico City."

Camille studied her in the haze of the streetlight. She was on the petite side, nice-looking, dark-haired. *Not blond,* Camille caught herself thinking. "What do you want?" she asked again.

"I was sent to give you something—" The woman unslung a large purse from one shoulder and handed it to her. Camille accepted it instinctively. "There's fifty thousand dollars in there. You can use it to get to Mexico City, or you can back away from that and use it to fight to keep your daughter and make your lives a little better. The person who sent me said you'd probably be having second thoughts about now. He wants you to know you're free to go your own way. Just like he's doing."

"Where—where is he?"

"In a motel owned by an old friend of his, about fifty miles downstate. He's growing a beard, eating six times a day to put on as much weight as possible, and waiting until a complete set of new identification cards can be printed and chemically aged. He'll be moving on in a few weeks."

"Where to?"

"His place in Central America. The one he told you about."

"I'd started wondering whether all that was true."

"It's true. He doesn't lie to people he cares for."

Camille tilted her head curiously. "Who are you, anyway?"

"My name is Jenny Revere. I'm Special Agent Edward Revere's wife."

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"What?"

"Look, you know about how Eddie, Gerry, and I grew up together in Chicago, how the two guys went off to Vietnam together, came back together, how I used to date both of them. But there's more to the story that you don't know. One night Gerry asked me to marry him. I told him I'd think about it. The next night Eddie asked me. I didn't have to think about it then. We drove across the state line to Indiana and got married.

"Gerry pretended to be happy for us, but inside I knew he was shattered. The three of us stayed friends for a while, then we started drifting apart, going our separate ways. Eddie and I had no idea where Gerry's life was leading him until one day when Eddie was a Chicago policeman he brought home a federal Wanted poster on Gerry. We were both stunned.

"Years later, when he was a fugitive, Gerry started telephoning me. I could tell by his voice that he was very lonely. He said he just wanted to talk. He asked me about Eddie, our children, the life we led, things like that. I felt sorry for him, so I let him keep calling. I never told Eddie about it.

"Eventually, Eddie joined the FBI Because he was from the same neighborhood as Gerry and had served in the Marines with him, he was assigned to the task force tracking him down. He didn't like it, but it was his job and he was determined to do his best at it.

"Not long ago, Gerry called to tell me he was sure he was about to be captured again. He sounded very tired, depressed, weary of it all. He wanted to quit, go away, start a new life. He asked if I'd help him do it. He knew he'd go on trial in San Francisco and he needed someone to pick him up behind the courthouse and drive him out of the city. For years I'd been feeling guilty about not telling him before Eddie and I eloped. I knew he was waiting for an answer from me to his own proposal. I felt like I'd stabbed him in the back, that in some remote way maybe I'd been partly responsible for his life turning out the way it did. So when he called, I couldn't say no. I was the blonde who picked him up the day he escaped. A cheap wig. Afterwards, I got some money for him from someone who was holding it. And now I'm doing him one last favor: bringing this money to you and telling you that he'll understand if you want to go your own way."

"Your husband never suspected any of this?" Camille asked incredulously.

"No." Jenny Revere smiled slightly. "I don't think he'd believe it in a million years even if someone told him. And, of course, there are only two people who know: Gerry and you."

"Aren't you taking quite a chance telling me?" Camille could not help thinking how much easier it would go on her if she blew the whistle on an FBI agent's wife.

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"I trust you because Gerry trusts you," Jenny said. "If he didn't trust you, he could be long gone and you'd never hear from him again." Her voice softened. "He wants you with him in his new life, Camille. You and your daughter. You can't imagine how much he wants a family. That's why he's taking this chance. That's why *I'm* taking this chance. I *want* him to make it." She glanced at her watch in the dim light. "I have to run. Eddie's flying back from Washington tonight. He's been there for a week. Big investigation over the escape." She sighed quietly. "We'll probably never see each other again."

"Probably not," Camille said.

Instinctively, after a tentative pause, the two women embraced.

Then Jenny Revere walked off into the night.

Camille walked down the street to her building and went up to her apartment. She took off her coat before she got there and draped it over the purse full of money.

"Sorry I'm late," she told the older lady who sat with Abby after school.

"No problem, dear," the lady said. "You two want to come to Bingo with me at the church tonight?"

"I don't think so, thanks anyway," said Camille. "See you tomorrow."

Abby was at the kitchen table, cutting out pictures of Val Kilmer from a movie magazine. "What do you think, Mom?" she asked, holding one of them up for her to see. "Isn't he cool?"

"A dream," said Camille. "What happened to Leo?"

"He grew a moustache—yuck!"

"You're a fickle kid, you know that?"

"Nobody's perfect, Mom."

Camille went into the bedroom and hid the purse on her side of the closet—the neat side. Abby's side was a disaster.

In the bathroom, she looked at herself in the mirror.

Well, she thought, *this is it, honey.*

Now or never.

Do or die.

It's showtime.

Taking a deep breath, she went back into the kitchen and sat down across from her daughter.

"Sweetheart, how'd you like for us to go on a nice, long vacation?"

"Where to?"

"Lots of places."

"Fun places?"

"Definitely fun places."

"Cool," said Miss Attitude.

Mother and daughter smiled perfect smiles of love at each other. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THE DRUM

by Meenakshi Gigi Durham

Until Vinayak looked at her, Neena was nothing to us, an object of affectionate derision, perhaps; nothing more. But under that hooded, smoldering gaze she was transfigured. She became . . . "Hot," said my brother Arjun in awe, but there were better words, and after that, "beautiful Neena" is the way we always thought of her: beautiful Neena, her glossy black braid of hair whipping about her as she spun on calloused heels, the brilliant end of her sari fluttering like a flag, the *payals* on her ankles jangling rhythmically, heavily, as she danced. And those were the words they used when they told us what had happened: "Beautiful Neena," they said, "your beautiful Neena is dead."

Raised in the Canadian Rockies and the Nilgiri Hills of South India, Meenakshi Gigi Durham currently teaches nonfiction writing courses at the University of Iowa. Her debut fiction combines her interests in Asian-American culture and crime fiction. Prior to receiving a university appointment, Ms. Durham worked as a professional journalist.

Because they were good parents, they didn't say more, but, "Do they think we can't read?" Jason Choo from down the street asked scornfully, dragging the tattered daily newspaper in and spreading out the front-page story where the particulars were spelled out in titillating detail. *Crushed cranium,* we read. *Clothing disarranged. Evidence of attempted sexual assault.*

"Whoa," my brother Arjun muttered, sounding out the words as he moved one grimy forefinger along the lines of type. "They got it all."

We were too young to be disturbed, too thrilled by the menace and mystery of it to weep for someone we had loved. For we had loved Neena, all of us, even as we snickered at each other's clumsi-

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ness in the dance studio, even as we quivered at the delicate touch of her hand as she moved our heads and our feet into the right positions, admonishing us as we bungled the complicated gestures, the *adavus* and the *mudras*.

"What is the point of this?" my father sometimes demanded after he had endured another excruciating recital. "These idiots will never be dancers. How does Neena have the patience?"—yet she did, and her passion for us, and for the dance, was sweet and calming, a benediction.

Her murder seemed unreal, part of the fantastical Hindu fables she recounted to help us understand the dances. I remember now the pale evening light playing across her face as she whispered the stories that made the dances come alive, tales of gods and demons, of the princess Sita being swallowed by the flaming earth, of staunch Savitri following her husband's spirit into the depths of hell. Cross-legged on the floor we sat, devouring her with our eyes as she gestured and gyrated, bending, leaping, her long lashes fluttering and falling as emotions poured through her lithe, liquid body. "The stories teach us," she said, "and the dance is your greatest gift to God. To dance you must believe." But we were little heathens, callow and puerile, and we had nothing to believe in.

The drums now—the drums were a different story. Sriram sat in the corner with the tabla on his lap, and his fingers thrummed the heartbeat of Neena's dance. The boys coveted that drum—"Can we play it? Can we?" they begged before and after every lesson. "Can we, please?" They imagined the clamor they could create with that drum: Its voice reverberated so sonorously at Sriram's lightest touch, they knew what pounding it must be like; but Sriram was jealous of the drum as he never was of Neena. No one was allowed to touch it; even Sriram only played it wearing light silk gloves so as not to sully its surface. The boys, who might otherwise have derided Sriram without mercy for his hapless mien or his complete lack of cool, somehow respected this. Arjun and Jason sat for hours, raptly watching him play, asking him endless questions about rhythms and techniques. "Sriram is a drum god," Arjun declared, and an unlikely friendship sprang up between them. I would see them hanging out, sometimes, talking earnestly in low voices that would dwindle to silence if I or anyone else approached. "How can you be friends with that dweeb?" I asked, and Arjun snarled, "He's an artist, idiot; he rocks." But always, despite Arjun's growing devotion, Sriram guarded the drum, handling it gingerly and reverently, as though it were some rare and exotic life form.

Yet for all his care, someone else *had* touched it, someone who had brought it down with furious force on beautiful Neena's fragile skull. The precious tabla was evidence now, encased in a plastic

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bag at the police station, Neena's blood congealing on its frame. The newspaper had taken pains to explain what it was to its provincial American readers, with a paragraph lifted straight out of some textbook on Indian music:

> The murder weapon is believed to have been a tabla, an ancient Indian percussion instrument comprised of two conical drums covered with membranes. The drums stand about six inches tall and are played by hand, often as an accompaniment to Indian classical dancing.

"Accompaniment," I repeated, "that sounds wrong, doesn't it?" and though Arjun and Jason were both quiet, they knew, too, that the word wasn't right, that it couldn't begin to describe the fluid precision that bound Sriram and Neena in the dance, the pulsating tensions between his rhythms and hers that flowed into one another, shifting, tumid. We were too young to understand it exactly but we knew there was something deep and visceral about the energy they generated; we knew it had something to do with forbiddenness, with the promise of sex.

"That must be why she married him," my friend Abby Klein said, and it seemed to explain a lot, for none of us could fathom why beautiful Neena was with Sriram of the narrow shoulders and bobbing Adam's apple.

"He must be really givin' her something," the big boys said, nudging each other and leering. He seemed not to be, though: The only real intimacy we ever saw between them was in the dance. The energy they radiated was of sex unfulfilled, of yearning and the anguish of lack. They never met one another's eyes, but "That is the Indian way," my mother explained. "It is not fitting for a wife to look directly at her husband. It would be insolent."

"You look at Dad," we objected.

"We are not traditional," Mother replied.

If they had been traditional, they wouldn't have been at Shanti. The newspaper took pains to describe that, too: "The cultlike spiritual community outside of Springville, dedicated to the practice of Eastern religions," a description our father took violent exception to.

"Cultlike!" he exploded. "We are not a cult! If we're a cult, then Jerry Falwell's place in Virginia is a cult. They call it a cult and they make it seem like murder is normal, is what we do here every day."

I could have told him that at Springville Elementary they thought that anyway. "Roos," they called us in school, short for "gurus"; they wouldn't sit with us at lunch or play with us at recess; they asked us if we ever took baths and if we worshipped the devil.

"They are ignorant," my mother said when we complained of this at home. "Perhaps you could educate them, teach them of

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yoga and meditation." She had no idea of the impossibility of this conceit.

"Try that and you get a swirly," my brother cautioned me. "Just act as normal as you can. Or be bad, show 'em we aren't dipshits." He was in fights all the time. That's where the idea of enrolling the boys in Indian classical dance came from. The ashram parents thought dance would be a way to channel their aggression into creative energy and spiritual ardor. The dance lessons with beautiful Neena became one more thing to hide from the kids at school, the townies.

"It's freakin' agony," my brother groaned, and my father agreed.

"Agony," he echoed, but my mother was adamant.

"They know nothing of their culture, nothing of their religion," she pointed out. "This dance is a way to teach them. They will learn with their bodies."

We laughed at Neena; we mocked her efforts to endow us with her grace and her strength. We collided with one another and made faces, scratching ourselves like monkeys. We didn't see her as a gift until Vinayak came, and after Vinayak, nothing was ever the same again.

He was our mother's cousin from Chennai. He was a movie producer, a big noise in India. He came to Chicago on business—as the backer of a musical extravaganza in some amphitheater—and made the trip out to Shanti in a rented car, a sedan that seemed barely able to contain his girth. He was bigger than any Indian I'd ever seen, and different from the spare, bespectacled, ascetic men of the ashram community. His hair and skin were lustrous, as if they had been oiled; he had jowls of flesh under his jaws; he sported a toothbrush moustache such as we had only seen in old cartoons; he smiled, it seemed, constantly. "I am a jolly fellow!" he announced to us, producing boxes of silvery sweets from the Indian groceries in Chicago, which we fell upon like wolves. "So, these American children like our Indian *mithais?* They are too thin, Shaila!" he admonished our mother. "You probably feed them only brown rice and cabbage in this ashram, isn't it?"

He was closer to the truth than he knew—the ashram parents were vegan, strict about sweets, fussy about food. We enjoyed his exuberance, the noisy pleasure he took in life, the way he seemed to love breaking all the rules—

"But he broke too many rules," Arjun said later.

"One too many," Jason Choo corrected him. "If only he had never looked at Neena," and we all knew that if he had never seen Neena, nothing would have happened; the horror would have been averted.

Vinayak had insisted on joining us in everything we did, from

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watching TV to playing shadow-tag; he scrutinized our homework: "Chee! This is what they give such big children in America? In India, we were doing calculus at your age!" He bought us sodas and candy bars, contraband in our homes. He smoked cigarettes in the yard, under cover of darkness, when our parents couldn't see him. We watched the red circle of his cigarette from our bedroom windows, thrilled and repulsed; once, he gave Arjun a drag, laughing loudly when it set him coughing and choking. We loved him and hated him, horrified and fascinated.

That is how he happened to come with us to the dance lesson on Wednesday evening. "It will be a good source of amusement to you," my father commented. "To see these children doing Bharata Natyam. They look like circus elephants dancing."

"But it is fun-tastic that they are learning Indian dance!" Vinayak cried with feeling. "Both cultures, isn't it? They must not forget the beauty of India just because they are being raised to enjoy Britney Spears dancing! Though she is worth the price of admission, too!"

He sat cross-legged on the floor in the dance studio with the other parents, groaning as he lowered himself. We wondered if his shiny fuchsia pants would split. He rested his jowls in his hands, and winked at us. He seemed not to notice Neena, who was wearing a shabby grey *salwar kameez,* the one with unraveling embroidery and a limp hem. Her hair was loosely knotted behind her head and she wore no makeup. She didn't compare, we knew, to the shiny-eyed starlets with whom our uncle normally consorted in his glamorous life in Chennai.

Neena clapped her hands and gestured to us to sit on the floor so she could talk. We sprawled on our butts, insolent, sloppy.

"We will learn a new *varnam* today," she said, "a new dance. Sriram and I will demonstrate. It is a dance of a young woman expressing her love for the Lord Shiva. Her husband is coming to take her away, but she is in love, she is feeling this very intensely and she is demanding to know why she should hide her feelings for Shiva." Neena put her hand on her breast and turned to Sriram, whose fingers fluttered on the tabla. The drumbeat, slow and tremulous, began.

Neena began to dance and the room was still. The sleek lines of her body were taut and visible against the flimsy silk of her clothing. She moved sinuously, lightly, the passion in the dance building like slow fire. The drum throbbed. Neena looked up and her face changed, her body changed; a tremor ran through her and it seemed, oddly, that her limbs became slippery and molten; her lips parted moistly. Her eyes were fixed somewhere behind my back. I looked around at Vinayak. He was sitting up as though electrified, gazing at Neena as though he might devour her. Their eyes were

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locked together. Neena stopped suddenly, and the drum slowed, halted.

"That is not the way," Vinayak said. He got onto his hands and knees and lumbered to his feet. He staggered across the room, unsteadily, as though he had been drinking; he seized the tabla from Sriram and we gasped at this transgression. "This *varnam*," he said, "is of passion. This dance must come from the heart and from the loins." He dropped to the floor and struck the tabla. "Dance," he ordered Neena. "Dance."

The drum throbbed and sang under his fleshy hands, and we were transfixed. We did not know the tabla could sound like that; we had not seen dancing like this before. Crackling currents, erotic and unfamiliar, skimmed like lightning across my skin, lifting the hair at the nape of my neck. Vinayak's gaze stayed, unwavering, on Neena's; his eyes burned like coals in the half-light of the room. Her body seemed to bend to his will, responding, blossoming, flushed and damp with ardor. The pulsating tensions between his rhythms and hers swelled to an erotic, throbbing crescendo at the dance's climax. We were too young to understand it, but we knew there was something raw about the energy they generated; we knew it had everything, everything, that was missing when Sriram and Neena performed together. When Vinayak finally stopped, he sagged back, spent, and Neena crumpled to her knees, her gaze still on his, in silent supplication.

Slowly, tentatively, one of the parents began to clap, and the others took up the applause; and we children went wild, not knowing what else to do with the purely sexual fervor that had filled us while we were watching them. We whooped and screamed, jumping around. None of us noticed in that moment that Sriram had disappeared.

Vinayak was full of plans for Neena—"She could be a star! I could put her in movies that would make *crores* of rupees for her!" Our parents looked disturbed, wary. My mother cautioned him, "She is young, Vinayak, and recently married. Don't fill her head with these ideas," but Vinayak turned on her, impatient.

"Ideas! I can make or break people, Shaila, and you know it. I know a star when I see one; a girl who can dance like that can have the world on a string."

"This is wrong," my mother persisted.

"It is my business," Vinayak declared. "Are you telling me how to do my business?"

But it *was* wrong; we could all see that. Neena changed when he was near; the intensity that flowed between them, earthy and raw, was unmistakable. She shivered when he glanced at her. Their pretext was dance; he claimed he needed to rehearse her so that

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she could audition for one of his director friends. He brought her to our house and we were vaguely embarrassed by the way they were together. She danced for him, while Sriram watched stone-faced from a corner. They stayed late into the night, long after we had been shooed into our beds. "It is inhumane," my mother pleaded, "to make her dance like this. What do you think you are doing?"

"She is an artiste," Vinayak replied. "Her art must come first." But we knew that for him it wasn't art that mattered: It was the scent of Neena's skin and the arch of her back as she moved. It was the fact that he could make her do what he wanted, while her husband watched.

"This is wrong," my mother said again.

We would not know, until much later, what the dancing had done. It was only later that we learned of the unborn child and of what the dancing had done to it. It was only later that all the rage made sense, Vinayak's and Sriram's; it seemed that Neena might have had reason to be enraged, too, but we never knew of that, we only sensed her sorrow.

"Whose child was it?" my father asked later, reading the autopsy details in the newspaper.

"What does it matter?" Mother returned, shrugging. "What is the point in finding out now?"

"It was Neena's baby, wasn't it?" I asked, puzzled. "Whose else could it have been?" and Arjun and Jason mocked me later.

"They were talking about the father, you troll," said Arjun, which mystified me further. Could dancing with someone cause a baby to happen?

"Depends on the dance," said Jason, laughing rudely.

"Dirty dancing," said Arjun, and he and Jason exchanged long lascivious looks.

At first he joked about it, but as time wore on he grew less cavalier and more edgy. We watched them over the banister from the upstairs landing, absorbing the charged energies that flowed between Neena and Vinayak; noting, too, Sriram coiled like a serpent in his corner, his eyes dark slits. "He can't stand it," Arjun said. "And Vinayak is just gross. What does Neena think she is doing?"

I could not put it into words, but it was clear to me what Neena was doing. She had never danced like that before; her body was blossoming, mellowing, loosening in Vinayak's presence.

"She's with him all the time now," Arjun reported. "She tells Sriram it is just art." And echoing our mother he said, "It's wrong."

I remember the moment when the tabla fell silent. We had grown accustomed to drifting off to sleep listening to its rhythms and the

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jangle of Neena's heavy silver ankle bells; and when both of these stopped it woke us with the impact of an explosion. I jumped out of bed and ran into the hallway where Arjun stood, poised like a deer.

"Something has happened," I said, and we ran to the stairs and leaped catlike down them. Vinayak stood in the archway of the living room.

"Something has happened," he wailed. "Neena . . ." He gestured across the room.

We ran to her. She was limp on the floor in the darkness, her leggings soaked in blood. She raised her head and looked at me, her eyes hot and dark. "Call a doctor," she gasped. "Call your mother. . . ."

Arjun ran to the kitchen. "I'll dial nine-one-one," he called to me. "Get Mom."

"I will do it," Vinayak panted. He stood at the bottom of the staircase and yowled, "Shaila . . . !" His voice was high and panicked, piteous as a child's.

The light from the streetlamps silhouetted the furniture and cast eerie shadows across the familiar living room floor. It didn't occur to any of us to turn the lights on. I crouched behind the sofa, terrified and confused. Neena's moans clutched at my throat, making me bury my head between my knees so I wouldn't have to hear them. I was dimly aware of the sounds of my mother stumbling around upstairs, and my father's bewildered barks of questions.

The police came first, not the ambulance; and when the lights were turned on, and they saw the tabla and Neena's skull and the blood on Vinayak's hands, there was of course no question of what to do. And later, throughout the trial and the questions of expatriation and the depositions and the questions, all the pieces fell neatly into place: Vinayak's jealousy when he discovered Neena's pregnancy, his anger, the violence, the miscarriage.

"I did not do this," he protested over and over again. "Why would I have done this? I could have made so much money from this girl!"

But his fingerprints were on the drum, and her blood was on his hands, and his protests were meaningless. "They all say they're innocent," the lawyer told us cynically. "They think we might buy it for a minute, even when their prints are all over the weapon."

No one thought to question us, beyond a cursory, "You kids see anything?" Arjun, for once, was wordless; he had nothing to tell them, no theories to advance. They were gentle with me, tousling my hair and speaking to me with absent-minded kindness, but generally ignoring me as they focused on the adults, my weeping mother, my raging father, trembling and tortured Sriram.

Children are always left out. In any time of fear or sorrow, they

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are outsiders, left waiting on the margins, invisible. If someone had asked me a direct question, perhaps I would have told them the truth. Even now, I don't know. For no one was aware of me, as I crouched behind the sofa; no one thought of me, in the horror and turmoil of the moment. Had they known—if they knew now—perhaps I would fear for my life; or perhaps it would not have happened. Perhaps if someone had noticed me, Neena would still be alive, a movie star dancing in an Indian film spectacle, wearing thick eyeliner and red lipstick and flowers in her hair. Perhaps she and Vinayak would be married, or perhaps Sriram would have gone with them to continue to play the part of the cuckolded husband in the film circles of Chennai. Maybe she would have had another baby. Maybe the world would know her, but not in the way they know her now, as a bizarre corpse, another victim of love.

If they had asked, perhaps I would have told them that I had seen Sriram, in his sweater and jade-green silk scarf and the black silk gloves that he always wore to play his precious tabla, bundled up though the September night was not cold, bending over Neena as she lay groaning on our carpet. Perhaps I would have told them that I had seen my brother Arjun get off the phone and cross the room to them in a bound, while Vinayak stood at the foot of the stairs hysterically screaming my mother's name. I could have told them of the glance Arjun and Sriram exchanged, a look of such deep adult understanding that it took my breath away, and changed forever my view of my brother. I saw Sriram slip the thick silk case onto the drum and place it carefully in Arjun's hands; I saw the tremor that rent my brother's body as he held the forbidden drum. And each time Vinayak called "Shaila!" I would have told them, Arjun had brought the tabla down on the back of Neena's skull. And then Sriram had seized it from him and slipped off the silk casing and fled lightly, easily, across the frozen grass and into the night, the bloody silk fluttering from his fingers.

He was at home when they finally called him, and my father went to fetch him. My mother gave him hot coffee and spoke soothingly to him. He sat white-lipped and trembling at our kitchen table, trying to answer the police officer's questions, breaking down to weep every now and then. His hands shook as they held the coffee cup.

"They have taken the tabla," Arjun said numbly. I looked at Arjun, who stood pale-faced and hollow-eyed beside his weeping drum master. Sriram stopped and raised his head to contemplate Arjun, suddenly steady-eyed and dispassionate. "No matter," he said. "We will get another. You are ready, I think, to learn to play it." ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

I Know Where You Live

by Jeffry Scott

Mason was getting dressed when Sheila said, "Cheating on your wife is one thing. Cheating on me as well . . . I know about conferences, my husband goes on them. The same kind." Sooner or later they all became insecure and stupid ones betrayed it. He hadn't expected her to be like that. Which made him stupid, too, Mason thought, and it made him smile.

Catching that in the dressing-table mirror, Sheila's voice sharpened. "Put it this way—mess me about and I'll do something about it. Tell your wife, that's a given." Expression unreadable, Mason wondered how she'd feel if she knew there was no wife. Angry, he imagined.

"If that makes you sweat, the rest will give you nightmares." Mason took it in, fingers steady while adjusting the tie's knot. Yes, Sheila could make things very difficult for him. He'd taken her back to the flat, just the once, and she had seen too much. Some women had a knack of going to the one drawer or pocket holding something better kept hidden.

"You're being ridiculous," Mason said, and he went to the bed. "Look at me. You are the most beautiful, exciting woman I have

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ever had anything to do with." Sheila believed that, he could tell. She ought to, for he was telling the truth. The sex was great; he didn't love her but he didn't love anybody.

Now he didn't like her and it was a pain; something new to conceal. He'd calculated on having enough of her in another few months and drifting away. Now he was shackled, never a pleasant sensation, until she tired of him. If she did, and that was not guaranteed. Twenty seconds for an enjoyable partner to turn into a problem. Life was full of twists and turns.

Now retired and serving as a consultant to England's *Daily Mail* on book-review policy, this story's author was for thirty years a national newspaper reporter in Britain. He uses the pen name Jeffry Scott for his fiction, and has been turning out stories for *EQMM* and *AHMM* since 1973. He is particularly adept at capturing his characters' styles of speech, the street slang, often, of the career criminal. ✝

"So you won't be going away at the weekend. If I phone and get the answer machine every time . . ." Sheila didn't bother to finish. He wished she had not come out with that much. It implied that he was slow on the uptake.

"Okay, I'll get somebody to fill in for me, but you're being silly. The north coast in winter and the hotel won't be up to much . . . you've done me a favor." He ran a finger along her shoulder.

"No more conferences," Sheila called after him as he closed the bedroom door. Playfully, she would have said, if called on it.

Seven months later, in a transport cafe, Hillyer was in menace mode. "Money, me old Dave. Supposed to be on the table before now, that's what you promised, and I don't see it."

He lifted a sauce container shaped like a tomato and peered beneath it. A little humor kept mugs off balance, though his size generally took care of that.

"I really appreciate . . ." Dave began, falling silent when Hillyer gave him The Stare. Actually Hillyer was thinking that Dave was a decent fellow, nice way with him. Good-looking but not a pretty-boy, a trade at his fingertips, punters would always need carpets. If Hillyer was in Dave's shoes he wouldn't give all his money away to bookies and blackjack dealers.

Nice wife and nice kids, no doubt, a nice little life, working for himself, not Hillyer's speed but each to his own, and the idiot was shoving it down the toilet. All Hillyer did was rob folk, bit of a slap if they fancied their chances. A judge had called him a menace to society, but what about Dave and thousands like him, respectable or just about, and they were menaces. The only difference was that Hillyer knew what he was doing, he wasn't allowing things to just

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happen to him.

Acutely uncomfortable, Dave cleared his throat to try again.

"Relax. Only money after all. Made round to go round, eh?" Hillyer had spotted Dave months ago, parking a new van behind the casino, Fitted Carpet Specialist and the address in an all-residential street, so the guy was a one-man business.

And he talked, did he ever. Terrific houses he'd seen, how rich some customers were. One evening Dave insisted on Hillyer sitting in the van while he was talked through a ring-binder full of laminated paper—letters of praise from clients. Hillyer endured weeks of boredom, on and off, before suggesting that Dave could do himself some good, a nice earner on the side and all for nothing.

When he'd explained how, Dave erupted. Not indignant, plain scared. Their casual friendship cooled, but Hillyer didn't mind. He could wait. Sure enough, he saw the fool coming out of his regular betting shop, and Dave didn't look at all well. Time for an arm round the shoulder: For punishment you put the boot in but Hillyer was after information.

Dave whined that he'd lost the lot—grocery money, the kids' lunch money for school tomorrow, everything, and how could he face his wife? Biting down on laughter, Hillyer pulled out his wedge and peeled off twenties. "There's a ton, pay it back when you can." Speculate to accumulate.

"I won't let you down."

"Waste of time trying, matey—I know where you live."

Now Dave had proposed paying it back at a tenner a week. "That's no good, I'm a fool to myself, getting ripped off by so-called mates. I've had enough. Pay what you owe or I'll take it out of your hide."

The clown swallowed convulsively and Hillyer leaned back in case Dave threw up in terror, it had been known. "Just kidding. You're a mate." The moment Dave smiled wanly, Hillyer scowled, adding, "And mates don't take liberties like you are doing. It's gotta stop."

Jeez, he could keep this up all day, it was priceless. Still, to business . . . "Catch on, Dave. You could get straight with me here and now, with a nice drink into the bargain."

"I—I'll think about it."

"Think fast, then." He took Dave's arm and marched him out behind a parked truck. "We need privacy, however it turns out in the next five minutes."

It took three. "There is this place I worked last week. Old couple, smashing place. I'm supposed to go there tomorrow, get my money, fifteen hundred quid."

"They keep that much in the house?"

"I gave them a price for cash, they pay less and I don't tell the taxman. The old girl called this morning, said they'd been to the bank. I'm supposed to go there tomorrow. No, it's too obvious, the law will be on my neck straightaway!"

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"Calm down. What you do, ring them tonight, say you can't make it, another job come up. It'll be too late for them to bank the dosh then. Any idea where they keep it?"

"I dunno . . . well, I did their kitchen a couple of years back, the cash came out of the old girl's purse that time. He's not fully with it, lovely old chap but he—"

"Not interested. They got pets, a dog?"

"No. Don't go hurting them, okay? They'll be good as gold, there's no need."

"Do I tell you how to fit carpets? Address, and tell me about the neighborhood."

Briefing over, Hillyer nodded grudgingly. "Sounds all right." Inwardly he was jubilant. Carisbrook Mount, an estate he'd often thought of trying. Big houses, secluded private roads. With alarms. Dave was such a tosser he wasn't sure if the Braces' house had one.

"No prob," Hillyer thought aloud. He was no good at alarms anyway. Daytime, clean set of overalls and a plumber's bag, they'd open the door. It was asking for bother, operating on those estates after dark. Parked vehicles drew attention, they all had double or treble garages and wanted the road kept tidy. The police paid more attention to rich areas and these days people in places like Carisbrook Mount might have clubbed together and hired security patrols.

"Will you do it tomorrow?" Dave cringed under the scowl, stammering, "The old girl will have it back in the bank if you don't. She said she doesn't like keeping too much in the house." He was getting in the right spirit now, excited as well as nervy; greedy, too. "There's this bloke lives alone, penthouse flat in Southampton, loads of antiques, I can look up the address and—"

"One at a time. We'll see how this pans out." Hillyer punched him on the shoulder, not too hard. "What you do, make sure plenty of people see you all morning tomorrow. Just in case the law checks, but they won't. See, I'm looking out for you."

"Yeah." Dave wiped his palms down the sides of his trousers. "Don't hurt them, Tommy, please. I feel terrible; they've been nice to me, cups of tea and bits of cake and that. And they're old."

"Then they'll do as they are told. Cheer up, my son. This goes right and you wipe the slate clean, plus I'll see you right, on top of that. Could be a very profitable future for both of us." Not so profitable, and short. Hillyer never used the same informant more than three times. Dave, weak as water, could be a dangerous source. See how this job went, then one more, tops. "Two-three years' time, you'll wish you had come to me before," Hillyer assured the prat.

Love was rubbish but Mason found himself liking Angie a lot. She was a little older than women he usually went for, steadier, and divorced. The sex was fine, if unadventurous. You couldn't have everything: She was kind, placid, and blessedly lacking in curiosity.

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Possessiveness didn't arise. Angie had her own place and, delighted when he turned up, she said it was a pleasure having somebody to cook for. He could tell that if he vanished on her, she'd be sad but not hold it against him. Nothing to beat, of course, her ex had been a right bastard. Mason disapproved of hitting women; they weren't as strong as men and they couldn't help being pains at times.

He and Angie were quite the married couple; she even made hot chocolate last thing at night. Mason told himself that he was playing at domesticity, and he hoped that middle age was not creeping up on him. It wasn't that, or so he believed. Angie's restful, low-key appeal lay in the fact that she wasn't Sheila.

He had to be super-careful around Sheila. Unknowingly she had transformed herself from diversion to chore. Further, she had made no more threats and that was insulting. Plainly she felt they weren't needed—the galling part being that her confidence was justified.

Dave had drawn Hillyer a sketch map of Carisbrook Mount, with a square for the filling station where you turned off the main road and went uphill, and a cross for the church. Take the left fork, keep going for a mile and that was Castle Avenue. He'd drawn on the back of a blank invoice complete with letterhead, that was how clever he was.

Hillyer was figuring how little he would give Dave this evening. The idiot was fixated on the cash available, no notion of what he'd sold. A couple shelling out one and a half grand for a carpet had to have good gear about the place. A ton, Hillyer decided, more than enough and lucky to have it. Fifty quid if the job boiled down to that fifteen hundred in the woman's purse.

Get the money, and if the place looked good, tie the old 'uns up and strip the house. He was using an estate car this time, just in case. Hillyer drove fifty miles before reminding himself to be alert, start using the mirrors.

One of the new MINIs, tinted windows, bugged him for a while. Not seriously; you could go miles on a road like this and the car that kept showing up behind was just going in the same direction. Shortly before the filling-station landmark appeared the MINI sped past with a bad-tempered flash of headlights and he saw no more of it, so that was all right.

Ten-thirty, just about right. Menfolk long gone to work and their women back from the school run, indoors with a cup of coffee. Hillyer saw only two cars before he took the fork at the church, and they were going the other way.

This had to be Castle Avenue. No road sign, you were supposed to know. Hillyer frowned as he slowed down. If Dave had sold him a pup . . . Avenues had trees spaced each side and this was all hedges in front of fields. Cows over there, even. He was planning

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retribution when the first house showed itself. Easy to miss among silver birches and it wasn't a house but a mansion, more chimneys than he could count at a glance before Castle Avenue curved west and the place was hidden again.

Hillyer passed three more houses before braking hard and backing up. The varnished sign in long grass on the verge announced "Lindens," and what he'd taken for a lane was the drive up to it. Bloody hell, the house would swallow two of his place with space to spare. Just for two wrinklies, that was never right.

He circled the bricked forecourt and backed up close to the front door, waiting to see what happened. Nothing, no twitch of the curtains. A magpie scolded from the roof ridge, three floors up. "Bugger off," Hillyer grunted, heaving himself out of the car. Yes, a burglar-alarm box on the wall above the porch and it went off if you tried forcing windows instead of a door. His last spell inside had taught him to be aware of that, though not how to do anything about it.

Hillyer hefted the plumber's bag, confirmed that the meaningless ID card was clipped to his top pocket and facing out, and pressed the bell. Waiting for response, he looked through the bay window to his right. Silver cigarette box, the kind of carriage clock you didn't get as a free gift, it looked really old, no batteries in that beauty. And that was just on the ornamental table he could see. Multiply by however many rooms and he might be coming out of this with ten or twenty grand's worth.

A distant door slammed somewhere within, and Hillyer adjusted his disarming smile. Needlessly, because whoever it was had gone into a room rather than leaving it to answer the summons. As his finger went to the bell push, the buzzer went again. Hillyer stepped back, head on one side, and the thing continued. Irrationally, he felt embarrassed and defensive: He hadn't jammed it and he wanted it to quit. Weird—nobody could ignore that noise, not particularly loud yet insistent.

Belatedly he understood that he was listening to a vacuum cleaner being used upstairs. The Braces were old and most likely their ears weren't sharp. Husband gaga, his wife deafened while she worked. Unless it was a cleaner who came today. He ought to have asked Dave about that, only Dave might not have known. Okay, two women and an old chap, nothing had changed.

Hillyer gave it five measured minutes by his watch, and two more tries on the doorbell. The vacuum cleaner stopped once, making him tense, only to resume in another room. This was ridiculous.

An idea came to him. People could be careless. Hillyer had broken into a factory recently, loading cartons of microwave ovens into a borrowed truck until his arms ached. Knowing the safe in the office was beyond him, he'd settled for petty cash and a good fountain pen—until he'd seen the safe's keys on a hook above the

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thing. Once-in-a-lifetime luck, but there'd been many lesser examples of forgetfulness or folly.

He investigated the path along the side of the house. Yes! Fine morning, the old girl wanted the place aired out. The kitchen door wasn't just unlocked or ajar, it had been wedged open with a cute triangular block and a carved mouse seemingly straining to keep the door back. He made a mental note to pocket the mouse on his way out; it would amuse his wife.

The kitchen was empty. Hillyer had a keen sense of smell and he picked up a suggestion of—pipe smoke, was it? The old chap, no doubt, and his wife hated the smell. It accounted for the open door.

Moving quietly for a large man, he checked every ground-floor room and even closets while the cleaner whirred away above. All clear. He'd been right, these people had plenty of portable possessions. Just as well that he'd brought a painter's dropcloth to cover whatever he took away. There'd be a heap of it, with cash for a bonus.

Keeping against the wall to minimise creaking, Hillyer mounted the stairs.

The vacuum cleaner was on the landing. There'd been something indefinably odd about that distant whine, and seeing the thing left unattended, he knew what it was. The noise welcomed as useful hadn't altered since he had first heard it. The pause had been long enough for the cleaner to be moved and plugged in again, but there'd been none of the changed pitch from a machine in motion—moving from rug to parquet floor, for instance.

The smell was stronger here, putting Hillyer in mind of Bonfire Night. Fireworks, that was what he had discerned in the kitchen. Somebody had launched a rocket or lit a firecracker, which was impossible.

Puzzled, he advanced far enough to look through the open door of a bedroom and he stopped thinking about the vacuum cleaner or its possible significance.

The woman on the bed had been beautiful. She wore a white bathrobe, with a towel wound turban-fashion round her head. A lot of blood soaked one lapel, around a black-singed hole.

Hillyer ran, getting halfway along the front hall before remembering that his exit was through the kitchen. He was in such a panic that the altered angle of the estate car did not impinge on him. It took the steering wheel's stubbornness as he turned out of the drive to tell him that a front tire was flat.

The first of several police cars would have stopped him anyway. Laboring down Castle Avenue with a steel rim striking sparks as it turned, he was bound to draw attention.

A plastic shopping bag from a supermarket chain with a branch in Hillyer's hometown was found thrust beneath the hedge within yards of Lindens. It held Sheila's jewellery and a snub-nose revolver with one empty cartridge case, as well as grimy cotton

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gloves. The right-hand glove, it emerged later, showed evidence of having held a firearm while it was discharged.

During the fifth hour of interrogation he remembered helping to change a tire, weeks back. Dave had insisted he borrow work gloves, there were plenty in the van. That accounted for DNA evidence linking the right glove to Hillyer. He was commended for ingenuity but urged to think again.

The police didn't believe in Dave Singer. They had been to the address Hillyer gave and the house belonged to an Asian accountant, Mr. Singh, who was offended to be mistaken for a carpet fitter. He'd never done manual work, he and his family had lived in the house for many years, and none of them recognised the description of a Caucasian, average height, brown hair, color of eyes unknown, no scars or other distinguishing marks.

Shortly after confirming that Lindens existed, Hillyer had screwed the sketch map into a ball and flicked it out of the estate car's window. The police looked for it, or claimed to have; it wouldn't have helped that much. Anyone can spend a few pounds at a print shop.

Some weeks after Thomas Hillyer was sent for trial, Mason was gratified by the way Angie's face lit up. He'd been spending more time at her house than his London flat; he had his own key. The sound of it in the lock had sent her into a jitterbug step as she dithered between making him a drink or scurrying to give him a hug.

"Hard day," she sympathised. "All these meetings lately, you must be worn out. There's stew in the slow-cooker but don't have it to please me if you had a big lunch."

"I could eat the plate," Mason said. And later, between mouthfuls, "Meetings are the only growth industry there is. Pre-meetings meetings, meetings about *other* meetings, meetings to review *previous* meetings."

Angie giggled and bit her lip. "That's why I like you, Mr. Peter Marsh . . . you never exaggerate."

"Well . . . " Mason pulled a face. "It's not the meetings. All the driving to get to them is the pain." That wasn't a lie. Five hours and two hundred miles ago he and an associate had robbed a bank at gunpoint. No problems, and enough money to take care of the rest of the year. Comparatively little—like sixty grand from today's meeting—and not too often kept you out of prison. He wasn't one to work for the sake of it. Some were: The take was a fringe benefit, they were addicted to defiance and danger. Planning was enjoyable and the rest sucked, prison above all.

In his youth he had considered the con game. An uncle, a veteran at it, explained the basics. They were simple. Greed is universal and classless. Don't be in a hurry: The longer it takes, the more certain the mark will be that it's all his own idea, therefore foolproof.

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Biding one's time had been the sickener. Mason was impatient, you tended to be at that age. He'd chosen another route and now he was too old to change, although knowledge of the basics was part of his mind-set.

Dismissing the matter, he thought he might take Angie on one of those Rhine cruises; it wouldn't break the bank and, appreciative when treated to a movie with a Chinese meal to follow, she would be over the moon about four days on a boat.

He felt a surge of affection for Angie. If she came across driver's licenses in three different names, all using the same initials, and as many different addresses, she'd never dream of snooping further and then blackmailing him. Not that she would find anything like that; the only upside of mistakes was learning from them.

So when, later that night, Angie asked, "Do you have a secret past, Peter?" Mason was nonplussed but not alarmed. His expression made her giggle. He'd always found gigglers engaging.

"I'm teasing. If you'd been a sign painter in the dim-and-distant, it would be too good to be true. Bet you can't paint a straight line."

"You win."

"What it was, I saw one of those taxis the other day, you know, with an advert painted all over it? When I trade the car in next month, maybe I could get a nice sign done somewhere. Just on the doors, nothing garish, name of the shop, where it is, the phone number." Angie leased a unit at the new mall and sold handicraft supplies and tools. "Had a drink with Mave and Edna last night, they think it's naff but I'm not proud and every little helps. Means the advert is there whenever I go out."

"We can do better than that." They were the same age but Mason felt indulgent as a father. "What you want, they do these plastic signs." He drew an oblong in the air. "Any size you like, embossed letters, logo, whatever you want. The beauty is they come off whenever you like, not a mark on the paint. Put it back often as you like.

"That way, you're going to a wedding or whatever, taking the motor on hols, you aren't lumbered with a trade sign."

"The stuff you know about! I've seen vans with those signs on the side. They come off? That'd be good. I wonder where they sell them. . . ."

"Tell you what, write down exactly what you want. When you get the new car, we can measure the doors, decide what size you'd like. Should be ready in a couple of days."

"I don't want you going to a lot of trouble. I wasn't hinting. . . ."

"No trouble. Remind me about it next time I have to go to London, I pass a place where they do 'em. Better make sure they are still in business."

Mason felt sure they would be. It was well under a year since Dave the carpet fitter had called there in a new van and collected his order. ●

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2004 EQMM Readers Award Ballot

If 2004 had a theme, it was Movies. In celebration of *EQMM*'s role in the Stephen King movie *Secret Window,* we featured interviews with the film's actors, director, and producer, a big-screen review, and an article about the movie's production-design team. Though we are eager to gauge reader response to this special nonfiction, none of this material is eligible for the Readers Award. The first, second, and third place spaces on this ballot are reserved for fiction only. But don't worry: If you are anxious to comment on our movie-related nonfiction, an additional space has been provided for that purpose at the bottom of the ballot. Please use it to tell us whether you'd like movie reviews, articles, or interviews to become a permanent *EQMM* department.

Whatever enhancements *EQMM* may make to its nonfiction departments, we never lose sight of the fact that our main business is fiction. And what a year 2004 was for fiction. In anywhere from three pages to thirty-five, eighty-five different authors delivered riveting tales that ranged from cozy to hardboiled, whodunit to psychological suspense. The year was notable for an exceptional number of writers new to *EQMM,* be they from overseas (as in Passport to Crime), making their fiction debut (as in the Department of First Stories), or just finding a new home in our pages. We hope the index provided on pages 141–143 will prove especially helpful this year, when there are so many new names to be remembered and considered.

The *EQMM* Readers Award is presented each May at a cocktail party preceding the Edgar Allan Poe Awards banquet in New York City. It has come to be one of the most pleasurably anticipated events of the extended festivities we call "Edgars" week. Let your voice be heard when authors from all over the world converge to salute their peers; fill out and return this ballot so that the plaque we give the winner next May represents you.

The rules for 2004 are as follows: Spaces are provided for first, second, and third place selections, but you may vote for just one story or just two, if you prefer. A point system will apply in counting the total number of votes received, with all first place choices receiving three points, second place choices two points, and third place choices one point. The story receiving the highest number of points will be the winner.

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If you can't recall a story title or its author, describe the plot as briefly as you can. Return the ballot itself (no copies will be accepted) to the address below, postmarked no later than the December 31 deadline.

The 2004 *EQMM* Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 2005 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-sized stamped envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My first selection for the 2004 *EQMM* Readers Award is:

My second selection is:

My third selection is:

Would you like to see more movie reviews and interviews?
Comments:

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Mail to: **The Editors**
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
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The Occupational Rehabilitation of Cousin Henry

by Tom Tolnay

Long before *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *My Big Fat Greek Life,* Greek American writers were using their experiences of culture clash to humorous, or, as in this case, darkly humorous effect in their fiction. Of partly Greek extraction, New York writer Tom Tolnay told *EQMM* that some of the characters in this new story are loosely based on people he observed as a child. Mr. Tolnay has been contributing to *EQMM* since 1993. †

In my family, work is more than a means of putting pilaf in the pot or wearing out the minutes between nine A.M. and five P.M. In my family, work is a patriotic service, tantamount to saluting the flag—the blue and white stripes of Greece or the stars and stripes of America—eight hours a day, five days a week. To say Uncle Stavros was lazy, therefore, would be to say he was a traitor. To say Uncle Kosmas worked like a jackass in his too-short life would be to say he died a good soldier. . . . This perspective should not be confused with the Puritan work ethic, which has its origins in religious overzealousness. With Greeks it is an anti-Socratic bias, a political reaction against the good-for-nothing thinkers of pre-Christian Athens who sat around and talked, talked, talked while the city-state was coming apart under their flabby behinds. No wonder Greeks in this century have gotten it into their heads that the only way to recoup the long-lost glories of the Golden Age is to work, work, work.

If the performance of labor is viewed by us as patriotic, the taste for it is considered hereditary. It was naturally assumed, for instance, that if Stavros had produced a son, or daughter when it comes to that, the result would have been a lounging-scrounging paragon of indolence. And when Kosmas's son Henry came of age—fourteen, old enough to take out working papers (an Ameri-

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can employment prerequisite that mystified my family, who found it queer that one needed "papers" to do that for which we were built)—it was naturally assumed he would immediately begin setting up pins at the bowling alley on Saturdays, take on a break-of-dawn newspaper route, apply as an after-school mop-and-hop at the neighborhood florist, and establish a modest but thriving mutt-shampooing operation to fill a free time slot (between church and lunch) on Sundays. And, all the while, do tolerably well with his school grades. It was naturally assumed he would race into manhood suffering from an acute case of the narrow-sightedness that is the curse of the ambitious: unable to set aside enough time to enjoy the pistachios and figs that rewarded his numerous enterprises. . . . None of this—neither the profits nor the excesses—came to pass. Henry Tarsipias turned out to be the laziest of the lazy, far more accomplished at idleness than even his illustrious Uncle Stavros.

Henry's career in slothfulness began early, right in his own household. My cousin refused to take out the garbage, go to the stores, wipe the dishes, sweep the steps, pick up his dirty socks. But it turned out to be nothing personal against his mother or his younger brother Harry: He was the same way in school, and would've behaved lackadaisically in church, too, had he not stopped going on the grounds that it was "too much like work." Henry shifted about from day to day the way most people shift their weight from leg to leg. Nor did he make any effort to acquire a trade for the future.

"Why bother?" he said sincerely.

"But after you graduate high school," his mother pleaded, "how will you live?"

"Same as you," Henry replied. "Off Pop's insurance."

Merrula bit her cuticles, watched for omens, and begged the family for advice. "Give him a good whipping!" seemed the consensus. But Henry, approaching sixteen, was already twice the size of his mother—north to south as well as east to west—and was given to unpredictable explosions of temper. Who can say in what manner he might've responded to the sting of a belt?

On his seventeenth birthday, after months of tug-of-warring with his mother—perhaps even with his father, by way of the grave—Henry Tarsipias dropped out of high school. His rationale was that since he was just a freshman—and had been for two years—books would only become progressively more annoying to him. Sounded on the mark to me. For though people who pour equations and grammar into kids' waxy canals have been known to invent a tale or two about their students, I fully believed their reports that Henry had never completed a single homework assignment at Franklin K. Lane High. Of course, the objections at home to his quitting weren't based as much on the principle that education is essential to a healthy, wealthy, and wise future as on the fact that his mother

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didn't want him parking his butt in the house all day, watching *her* soap operas, smoking *her* cigarettes, drinking *her* beer—while she was recording deposits and withdrawals of customers at the bank.

If Henry had trumped up a philosophical explanation for his lack of effort in or out of school (even that shop-worn complaint that life is pointless and, therefore, so is any kind of labor contributing to its sustenance), or if he had simply kept his teeth shut, he might've drawn our sympathy, our forgiveness. But no. Brandishing a bramble of coal-miner's hair and squared-off lumberjack shoulders, Henry crowned his sublime sluggishness with loudly (and regularly) offered disdain for all those who were "dumb enough" to work for "mule drivers" at "dull-as-dishwater jobs" for "peanuts." "You'll never find *me* that hard up," declared Henry, sprawled out in an armchair (draped with a bedspread), mashing peanuts between his sharp teeth, staring at the Yankee game on TV.

Such proclamations notwithstanding, my cousin finally went to work. But never let it be said he was not true to his bias. Henry became employed only because his total lack of patriotism weighed so heavily on the family's deep reservoir of guilt. Collectively we kept finding for him "things to do," plus his mother threatened to "kick a hole" in the TV tube if he didn't "at least try." I say "kept finding" because despite numerous opportunities at a variety of careers, at odds-and-ends jobs, Henry exhibited a special genius for losing his way, his memory, his carfare, his temper, and, therefore, his position. It would not be cruel (nor inaccurate) to state that the only thing steady about his employment was his getting canned.

First he was a table clearer/wiper at the Acropolis Cafeteria, owned and operated by Aunt Harriet's former mate Christos, out on Metropolitan Avenue. No uniform or tablecloths, but at least it was with almost-family and at least he could eat all he wanted and at least it was not far from home and at least the salary was . . . well, the food was edible, anyway. But as tolerant as Christos can be, and that is nearly as forbearing as his namesake, not even the Lord's Only Begotten Son could have been expected to dish out a salary to an ex-nephew who, his first week on the job, only showed up at five P.M. on Friday—the very moment that pay is handed out. Particularly since Henry got irritated when he found no payroll envelope waiting for him.

"I didn't come in this week 'cause I was sick," Henry sniffed self-righteously.

"But we can't pay you for sick days when you haven't even started working," Christos pointed out in a kindly tone.

"So that's your game," said Henry. "Well, it's against the law to employ a child without working papers—I'm gonna report you to the labor board!" . . . a threat he never followed through on, probably because he was too lazy to find out where it was located.

Then he did some time in the shipping room of the blouse factory

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in which my mother had operated a massive black sewing machine years before—when the family's winter coat allowance had dwindled to a few dimes and nickels mixed in with thin red bingo markers in a cracked cup. The foreman still remembered Evangelina as punctual and steady. So her nephew was hired to fold the flattened cardboard into boxes, insert fresh blouses, tuck in the flaps, and, finally, neatly stack the shiny white boxes in large tan shipping cartons. When Henry ran out of blouses, he was supposed to haul another big batch (on a hand truck, on the freight elevator) up from the lower floor—a task too onerous for his lifestyle, he said later. Instead he would pack the boxes with garbage, of which there seemed an endless supply in a row of huge, nearby barrels. Receiving orange peels and scraps of cloth and used tissues instead of crisp white blouses in the boxes did not please the shops served by Greenpoint Modes. Not surprisingly, they threatened to take their business to Astoria Togs. When the globular foreman called his new employee into his cubby-corner office, Henry became indignant, attracting the lined-up eyes of the machine operators with his shouting: "Don't get your belly in an uproar! Nobody'd want to buy these rags anyway."

Through a friend of Theo's (Aunt Delphinia's boyfriend), Henry went to work as a gas-pumper at a Mobil garage. At last, at long last, it looked as though we'd hit upon the right placement for my cousin; his big ears and long nose seemed to sharpen around the roar of engines, the stink of burnt oil. For a week straight he showed up at the garage—and on time. That Saturday, the illusion of occupational rehabilitation exploded, almost literally. Henry got into a squabble with a redhead, reportedly over her refusal to give him her phone number. So he inserted the nozzle into the Ford, splashed gasoline all over her lap, then took out a pack of matches from which he broke off a single one and held it with his thumb against the striking surface until she—with, no doubt, a wildly shaking hand—scrawled out her phone number, her address, her Social Security number, even.

Relatives who dropped by the family headquarters in Flatbush always found Henry's vocational trials startling enough to cause them to shake their heads knowingly and to tsk-tsk hopelessly. And my mother gladly contributed a pot of harsh coffee, two or three stiff raisin buns, not to mention her eyes, ears, and mouth to the proceedings.

But she got quite upset the afternoon her sister Merrula, who had spawned the lazy oaf in the first place, alluded to the fact that Evangelina's only son (namely me) had not invited her oldest son (my cousin) to come work at the restaurant her brother-in-law (my father) had founded. With a self-righteous squeal Evangelina replied: "My husband (God rest his poor feet) gave his life to keep that business up!" Aunt Merrula's plum-shaped face crumpled into a prune before our eyes, but at least she got the message: Evangelina

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didn't want the restaurant to go down the drain like leftover grease. I agreed heartily, though silently. I needed no help whatsoever in running that business into the sewer. So it was that my mother and I kept trying to pawn Henry off on other people's businesses.

By the time Henry turned twenty he had already gone through more careers than any three people are entitled to in a lifetime. In addition to those aforenamed employments, without a license to drive he parked (and dented) cars for Municipal Lots, swallowed the donuts he was supposed to be sugaring at Krueger's Krullers, delivered (if not always to the correct address) urgent messages for Western Union, and dusted bones at the Museum of Natural History—with nearly disastrous results! . . . not to mention other endeavors that escaped our ears because they didn't last enough hours to have been reported to the family at large. Since none of these positions was retained for more than a week—no, that's not true, he stayed on at Murph's as a barkeeper for twelve days (he loved his brew)—Henry could not be said to have gained on-the-job experience at any single vocation, except loafing, a skill he refined daily the way a carpenter works at smoothing his thrust with a plane. And the more expert he became at doing nothing, the more irked the family became. Personally, I never felt particularly threatened by his laziness . . . until one night on my way home after a withering day at the restaurant when I spotted my cousin (in downtown Brooklyn) slung out on a bench as if it were a beach chair, whistling at the girls bouncing by, and it struck me that his Florida-like approach to life would enable him to live twice as long as me.

Gradually the family let go of the dream of rehabilitating Henry Tarsipias. To compensate for this loss of a receptacle for their abundant concern, the family turned their attention on me—their ally—monitoring my love-life with the idea of aiming me toward some "nice Greek girl." Apparently they needed a cause, any cause, to keep up their spirits. But I can't blame them for losing interest in Henry. It was no fun nagging a twenty-something-year-old foot-dragger upon whom, it had become thunderously obvious, they were having no effect. Curiously, when Henry noticed they had begun shifting their focus, interrogating me about Babs Sleat, a buxom Jewish divorcee I'd begun to "see," my cousin looked as though he felt slighted. Over a Thanksgiving roasted lamb (they never got used to the big bird) at our place in Flatbush, under the hung-from-a-chain domed fixture (that hadn't glowed for years), my cousin exclaimed: "How come no one tries to help me find a job anymore?" Too stunned to reply, we watched and listened for clues to what that statement could possibly mean in the mechanism of the universe. But all he did was sulk the rest of the holiday.

To my knowledge, the matter did not come up again for months,

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and everyone more or less forgot the sullenness, the self-pity of Henry. In part, they forgot because Babs and I were still getting together, despite the family's subtle hints and, finally, outright threats to cut me off—not from my inheritance, which consisted of a set of dishes from Greece, but from my "flesh and blood." But my cousin had been quite serious, as we soon found out. Unbeknownst to us, the good-for-little had landed himself a position, or so Uncle Augie claimed. Seems Henry had been palling around with a group of fellows at the bowling alley bar, and they had taken a liking to him. (He did, admittedly, have an impulsive, friendly smile.)

"They gave him a lead on a good-paying job," Harriet's latest husband revealed, "and he's been at it three months."

"Three months!" we cried like a chorus of sirens.

"Three months," said Augie gravely, for it required repeating to be absorbed, and gravity to be believed. (The scarcity of hair on his pate helped bolster his credibility.)

"What kind of work is he doing?" we wondered with stretched eyes, suddenly willing to believe that life is full of tricks. Not that the sort of work mattered. It was work! But my mother and I were naturally very curious about any activity that could keep Henry showing up for three months.

"Insurance," said Augie, sitting up straight in his dark-green suit jacket, just like a local insurance broker.

"In the actuary department?" I inquired with great interest.

"In claims?" someone else chimed in.

"No," said Augie. "Selling."

"You kidding?" I muttered. "I tried selling policies and would've died from hunger if George, Senior, hadn't gotten me into the food business. People always need to eat, as Papa used to say. Is Henry selling by phone or door-to-door?"

"He visits . . . companies."

I was impressed. "At the corporate level?"

"Well," said Augie, scratching his lotion-scented chin, "candy stores and groceries."

Before another used breath was returned to the suddenly close atmosphere in our kitchen (a room with a ceiling high enough to trap plenty of carbon dioxide), I understood the nature of the insurance being peddled by Henry Tarsipias: squeezing nickels and dimes out of neighborhood shop owners to "protect" them from the hoodlums for whom he worked. If the old folks didn't come across, some broken-nosed high-school dropout, too big for his own (or anyone else's) good, would put an inch-thick heel through a glass case that sheltered penny licorice drops or yellowed notepads. Next time, it could be a few bones. It's not as though these immigrant couples made any money. All they bought with their sagging wooden shelves was an illusion of freedom, unpacking and stacking and figuring and sweeping sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, while five percent

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of their dusty stock was swiped by customers who were also being robbed by their employers; and five percent of their take was tithed out to two-bit thugs . . . small-time human beings like my cousin.

Henry Tarsipias's regular employment revived our interest in his vocational development—and took their eyes off me! Understandably so, for his job offered just enough conflict between morality and patriotism to put the family to one of its most meaningful tests of character in this generation. There arose two basic attitudes: (1) This business of Henry's was evil; (2) At least it was work. When stacked directly one against the other, there is no question that point one took precedence over point two. But if, in the ongoing discussions of Henry's fortunes and future, these two points were widely separated—as they often were—so that comparison became moot, or even silly, then there was plenty of sentiment riding on point two. Surrounding a bottle or two of wine or whatever, they occasionally argued into the night in our kitchen. Since I had to get up at five-thirty A.M. to prepare for breakfast at the restaurant, I usually bowed out around midnight, but not before I had taken a stand. While I strongly favored point one, I could sympathize with Augie and my cousin Wei, who held that this was "just the beginning"; that at least Henry would get to know the feel of work; that before we knew it, he would get on track with employment suited to his talents. Exactly what those talents might be, however, never came up.

The patriotism faction proved to be correct in one respect: This was just the beginning. Unfortunately, it was not the beginning of what they'd hoped for—it was the beginning of a long, successful career in hooliganism. Henry truly liked his job, and it's not difficult to see why. Ten, maybe eleven hours a week he worked—at fifty dollars an hour! This enabled him to move into his own four-room apartment on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, to be closer to work. (His bosses had assigned him to the courthouse area, near the Stadium.) Furthermore, his visits to the candy stores and delis and shoe-repair shops over the first several months had never required anything more strenuous than a smile and a square, open palm on the counter. (At least, that's what we heard from Augie, who sometimes traveled to the Bronx on business—wholesale distribution of some sort.) In a few ways, Henry's position was like his old Western Union job—moving from place to place—but with one important difference: At that company he'd been a lowly deliverer; in this operation he was a big-shot collector. Thus his assessment of the working world had proven out for him: "Only stiffs work a long, hard day for coolie wages." Add to that the touch of prestige—the fright of shrunken, wiry folks; the awe of curly-haired brats on tricycles; the long-lashed winks from counter girls—that came with his work, like tips, and it was understandable that he would seek advancement in his profession, like any up-and-coming executive.

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Certainly attempts were made to "talk to Henry," partly to check out his thinking, partly to let him know ours. And on at least one occasion a non-phoned-in, mother-to-son appeal was rendered. Henry could not resist the lure of her legendary Italian-style spaghetti sauce. He took a cab all the way from the Bronx to Brooklyn, thumped his brother Harry on the shoulder with a "Hiya, kid," ate a dozen meatballs, drank two quarts of beer, and complained repeatedly how small their TV set was—while staring at it throughout his mother's speech. Harry, a shorter but less lazy version of Henry, said nothing to help our cause. He simply looked and listened, eyes wide. Merrula, as resolute and lean as a five-year-old maple, had to bring up the subject herself, and it ended like this:

"I'm happy you've found work, little Henry, but there are nicer ways to earn a living. Jobs that will make your family proud."

Undoubtedly eyeing the time gleaming up at him from his gold-laden wrist, Henry arose and smiled broadly, like a minor-league ballplayer who'd been asked to autograph a scorecard: "What's the family ever done to make me proud?"

There was a good answer to that—that the family had never done anything to make him ashamed, and that was something to be proud of. Aunt Merrula didn't think of that. After Henry left the two-and-a-half-room apartment, the prewar brick building that had been smoothed at the edges by polluted air, she escaped into the bathroom to blot her eyes. When she returned to the table, her younger son, Harry, said: "Looks great, doesn't he, Mom?"

That encounter convinced her relatives that without a husband to back her up, Merrula was helpless against the big lug. Which is why Uncle Augie was beseeched to intercede. Now Augie wanted "nothing to do with" this assignment, but there was no question he was the right man for the job. Augie had been followed for years by tainted rumors about his own workaday comings-and-goings. In short, Henry respected him. At last Aunt Harriet must've played Lysistrata, for he agreed to try. But if there had been no such game as baseball, they might never have met and talked. For weeks, we were informed, Augie had tried to lure Henry with beers and burgers at the Blarney Stone.

No luck. It took a pair of box seats, Yankees vs. White Sox. Wearing a sharkskin suit and fedora, Henry elbowed through the hot-dog-and-peanut parade, the hero-worshippers, the ticket-hawkers, arriving on time under the smooth cement face of the Stadium. But even though the sky was clear, and even though the Yankees were winning by three runs, nephew and uncle could not agree past the ballfield. No surprise to me. Augie's task was a delicate one: He had to do an about-face on years of family brainwashing—he had to talk Henry out of working.

Right after the Yankee shortstop slapped a ground-rule double,

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and the roar of the fans had subsided, Augie commented: "A young guy like you shouldn't be working so hard—he should be having fun."

Henry's broad, easy face puckered up: "I *am* having fun."

Gazing at the sharp creases in Henry's shiny suit, Augie wound up saying: "Money isn't everything."

"It's not just the money, honest. It's like the family always said—work makes a guy feel like a big shot." I can picture Henry, at this point, inspecting Augie's satiny shirt, crocodile shoes, and adding: "Isn't that why you went after the quick kill, Uncle?"

Years passed before it occurred to me that Uncle Augie's mission may have failed for a much more basic reason: He didn't really try. I suspect Augie had gotten him the job. I suspect Augie may have been his boss.

Half a year passed and, according to patchy dispatches from the front lines in the Bronx, Henry was dressing snazzier and talking more like a big shot every day. This may well have been the case—we never got to see him anymore. The higher he climbed in his profession, the less he wanted to do with us. I figured it was because of the nature of his business, but I came to accept that this would have been true of him even if he had worked as a locksmith. But if we did not get to see Henry's patent-leather shoes and silk ties, we got to stare at the bunched-up skin around the eyes of his "customers," or people a lot like them. Curiously, even though our neighborhood shopkeepers were not those visited by my cousin, we felt increasingly uncomfortable entering the dim caves of their stores, chatting with Mr. and Mrs. Epstein, Mr. and Mrs. Lugden, and old man Brovurst, all of whom had given us free weather reports or an extra slice of bologna for years. My mother found herself walking seven blocks further just to pick up a quart of milk and one pound of onions at an overlighted, overheated supermarket, where teenaged checkout girls with stained hair pushed the pennies at her.

While Henry's visits undoubtedly distressed his Bronx clientele—their dried faces already long wrinkled into an acceptance of life's unjust taxations—at least he'd never had occasion to flex the muscles that had formed on his body so firmly (in spite of his lack of physical exertion). Or so Augie had assured us. Even if that was true, we all knew that the line between thought and action, like the line between life and death, is very frail and often difficult to hold. We all knew that if he had not yet shaped a fist against the old, or uprooted with his knee a shelf displaying greeting cards, it wouldn't be long before that temper of his got the best of someone. And that, of course, was true of us, too. . . . It wouldn't be long before each of us saw in our minds less and less of the linen handkerchief in his lapel pocket, the come-on smile. And once those better images faded from our heads, it wouldn't be long before we stopped speaking his name. ●

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SOUNDS OF SILENCE

by Dennis Richard Murphy

There he is, the son of a bitch. Or her. Someone just walked past that window and the two of them are home. The Right Honorable Bergerons dine in tonight. A rare event. The wheels of government stand still.

My view over a fieldstone fence dividing two snow-covered lawns, through dead shrub branches, to the gap in the curtains is not perfect, but it's as good as it will get. The scope helps, although the tiny figures inside look wavy behind the leaded glass. There's more lead in vintage glass. That's why old windows sparkle with a cleaning. I know about windows.

Distinguished Canadian filmmaker Dennis Murphy is an *EQMM* Department of First Stories author, and *EQMM* can also claim to have published his first poetry (see "Final Escape," in this year's Sept./Oct. issue). He has gone on to write several notable stories since his 1/03 debut for *EQMM*, including last year's "Dead in the Water" *(Storyteller Magazine)*, which was recently nominated for the Canadian Crime Writers' Arthur Ellis Award for best story.

The two security goons are in position: I can see one to my far left standing just inside the driveway gate; the other is on a seventeen-minute circuit around the property. They switch roles after every rotation. I know their habits. I see the irony of their presence—it provides tangible evidence the Bergerons are home. Bodyguards don't bother guarding where there are no bodies to guard, when the white-walled wheels of Bergeron have carried their masters off to politically apt receptions or throne speeches or vote-gathering photo opportunities.

More ironic is that it's the wheels of Bergeron that brought me to this. Brought me to them. There's a straight dark line between an affluent young Bergeron speeding past my frozen thumb and me freezing my ass off in an upscale tree fort next-door to his party-provided manor house. That straight line is twenty-five years long.

Political Science. We were in the same class, PolySci 1E6. I couldn't afford to live on campus and home was too far away with-

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out a car, not that I could stand to live there anyway. I rented a cheap room with some other students a mile and a half down the highway from school. I'd hitchhike to class every day. It wasn't a big deal back then—there weren't perverts looking to kill people who couldn't afford cars. Early in the morning I'd get rides from wordless working men on their way to day shifts in the East End. Later I'd get picked up by businessmen driving to downtown offices who chattered about quitting school in Grade Ten and making lots of money in spite of it. If I didn't have a class till mid-morning I'd get rides from housewives headed for the city shopping centers who'd lecture me on the importance of a good education. I was a thankful yet captive audience, subservient to their thoughts.

The figure passing back and forth in front of the dining room window must be a servant or a maid. She passes too often and too regularly to be casually employed. In the distorted instant I see her, she might be wearing a uniform. I picture the Bergerons at opposite ends of a long mahogany table, with this maid dashing between them with a gravy boat or water jug. "More ice water for Mr. Bergeron, Emma." "Yes'm." "The Parmigiano for Mrs. Bergeron, Emma." "Yes, sir." While they're dining I can afford to rest my trigger hand for a few minutes. I have a soft moleskin pocket in my Barbour jacket just for that purpose. Designed for autumn grouse hunters, it's surprisingly warm. My stomach's rumbling and I can feel the cold starting to cramp my right leg again. Off the scope I can barely see the gap in the curtains.

Gaps in the traffic rhythm were part of the daily hitching routine, calm periods that were only painful when the weather was cold or wet, which is most of the school year in this part of the world. After a month or two I could identify regulars on the route, including some fellow fledgling pupils of politics who came from a world where parents paid tuition and bought their bright children colorful cars. Bergeron was one of them. He had an orange MGB, the GT hardtop model that was my favorite then. I used to pray he'd notice me as other than a shivering shadow at the side of the road.

Someone—the server, I imagine—just closed the gap in the curtain. I can only see dull gray shadows behind the white curtains through the scope now, and then only when they move. There'll be a server and a cook, but they'll leave after they've cleaned up. I can wait. I've waited before.

I'm sure Bergeron knew I was going to the same class as he was. Rose and I had sat beside him at the back of the lecture hall more than once. In his cozy car he'd stare straight ahead or look off to his left, pretending to see something more interesting than a poor student waiting in the roadside waste, his thumb sticking out and shoulders hunched forward to keep the cold away. I'm exagger-

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ating. It wasn't that bad. Despite the waiting, I usually made it to school on time and if I missed Rose in class I'd see her after the lecture in the library, usually at the big table closest to the window on the ground floor. We smiled at each other the first time because we had the same textbook. Then we had coffee together twice. Three times, really, counting the time she was already sitting with a crowd. She had frizzy black hair, pale skin with tiny freckles on her arms, and a nose too big for her face. She was pleasant to me and wore nice clothes. I liked her very much.

She was in the library the day Bergeron drowned me. My down ski jacket was limp and dripping, my books soaked and stained with filthy water, and my jeans dark with wet. I thought the librarian was going to stop me but I walked toward Rose with such purpose that she didn't dare. I must have looked furious. I was. Even Rose looked frightened.

"God, Dave. What happened to you? You're soaking wet. You'll catch your death of cold." I remember her exact words. I remember how she cared. I told her how Bergeron had pulled into the curb lane as he approached me, told her that I'd felt pretty good he was pulling over because a ride with him could become a regular thing for the winter. Then, at the last minute, he geared down and sped up and swung left into a pile of slush the size of a suitcase, covering me in ice and filthy water from head to toe. I was so damned angry I couldn't talk. I should have gone home, but I wasn't thinking straight. I walked the highway to school. No one stopped for a drenched rat. By the time I got there the class was over and my teeth were chattering uncontrollably, so I went to the library to tell Rose and get warm.

If they're sheer curtains they're certainly thick ones. Maybe doubles. With a liner to keep the heat from seeping out those leaky leaded panes. The dull gray shadow passes back and forth, back and forth, soothing as a slow metronome, an adagio for dining. "Take the courgettes to Mr. Bergeron, Emma." "Yes'm." "Tell Cook they're overdone, Emma." "Yes, sir." The Brits call them courgettes. We call them zucchini. My leg hurts.

Rose was comforting. She taught me the head-pinching trick. Look from a distance at a person who's pissed you off, she said, and hold your thumb and forefinger about a half an inch apart in front of your eye so that their head fits in the gap between them. Then close the gap. *Squish.* It felt good when I tried it on some people in the library, people I didn't even know. Rose did it, too, making a squishing noise with her tongue and saliva pushed through her teeth. *Squish. Squish.* We laughed so hard the librarian asked us to leave. We couldn't stop laughing. After that I used it often when people didn't pick me up or pretended I wasn't there, especially Bergeron. *Squish.* I must have squished his head a hundred times that year.

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My stomach won't stop growling. I ate a late lunch on purpose so I could wait this out. I have half a sandwich but it's against the other wall in my bag and stale by now. I have to get here early to avoid the police patrols, the bodyguards, and the nosy neighbors. I park over on Rowbotham in the liquor-store lot, where I change into my old-man clothes. I take the walker out of the trunk and shuffle slowly into this part of town the pillars of our society call home. Concealing the rifle in the Barbour is easy and the streets are usually empty anyway. They use big SUVs just to go to the liquor store so the only people walking are the hired help—Filipino women pushing expensive prams. When the rich see strange men wandering their meticulously ministered boulevards they report them, unless they have a white van and a uniform like a pest-control guy or a gas man. Or unless they're old. Service people and the elderly are invisible to the wealthy. I chose old because I need to be here late, and you can't leave a truck on the street around here after dark.

I knew Rose was taking PolySci as a prerequisite for Law. She told me. And I knew she planned to switch to law school after two years. Still, I wasn't prepared when she left. Just like that. As if we'd discussed it, which we never did. As if we weren't best friends. As if she wasn't my girl. I'd never really said that to her, but I kind of accepted it and I thought she did, too. We had fun together and we didn't have fun with anyone else. Or see anyone else. As far as I knew. I didn't. That's special. Isn't it? Apparently not. She just left.

There they go now. Dull gray shadows. More of them. Dinner's done. Now to repair to the living room, or library or salon or whatever they call it. Yeah. There's the maid turning lights on in the room to the left of the dining room. The curtains are still wide open and I can see through the French doors. Steel-clad, Extrusco, I think, top-of-the-line double-glazed with the small-pane rectangles beveled to match the original glass. I blow on my fingers and duck automatically when I see the circuit guard's silhouette pass below their full-length panes. The maid disappears in the direction of the dining room, where the lights become brighter. They must be on a dimmer. I guess she's clearing up the dinner dishes. "Coffee and dessert in the library, Emma." "Yes, sir." "Remember Mr. Bergeron's Sweet'N Low, Emma." "Yes'm."

I was upset with Rose's departure. Not really angry. I was hurt, I guess, because she seemed to feel nothing. Like we hadn't shared anything worth keeping. I knew where the law school was. It's a large campus of old limestone buildings with copper roofs gone green in the smoggy middle of the city. It's been there for years, or it looks like it. Around it is an ornate stone fence with inset curly black iron spindles that make it appear impenetrable, but there

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are gates on three sides where anyone can walk in and out. I did it myself, worried a bit that she'd see me and think I was weird or something. So I hung around across the road from the south gate where I could hide in the crowds waiting for the streetcar. I went there four or five times before I saw her.

There's Bergeron now. Bingo. In a smoking jacket. Christ. A smoking jacket. Do people still wear smoking jackets? Does Bergeron smoke? He's come in through the arch from the center hall in his shiny smoking jacket. Jesus. Now he's behind the bookcase. The dining room just went dark, so the cleanup's done. Yellow light spills out onto the snow from the kitchen windows at the back of the house. Shadows roll as dishes are done. The second guard has reached the front gates now and they're sharing a smoke before his partner leaves for his circuit.

The first time I tried to follow Rose I wasn't prepared. She walked out the south gate with a friend, both hugging their books against their chests like they were cradling babies, talking a mile a minute. She'd cut her hair short, which bothered me. It wasn't like she should have asked me or anything, but it was a pretty major change and she might have asked my opinion or told me she was thinking about it. Her girlfriend had short hair, too. Maybe they'd cut it together. Maybe they were roommates. Girls in the city with boyfriends back home. I boarded the streetcar first and sat at the back where I could hide behind a newspaper until they got off. It was almost rush hour and they had to stand up near the front. I could see Rose talking to her new friend, holding her books in one arm, using her free hand a lot the way I liked. Smiling and shaping and talking and making her friend laugh. Then they jumped off. I wasn't expecting it. I was blocked by people standing in the aisle and couldn't get to the doors in time. I looked out the window for a street name but could only see an orange and white beer store sign and a storefront with dirty windows and a sign saying they rented tools. I saw Rose waving goodbye to her friend, so they weren't roommates. She looked right at me, but I don't think she saw me.

There's a wide paved lane that runs past the rear of these big houses and the block behind, lined with stone garages and solid back gates. It's well lit at night and regularly patrolled by sleepy cops in overheated cruisers who have been told to be seen keeping the taxpayers safe, especially those who pay the high taxes. I usually arrive about two in the afternoon, long before the threat of nighttime crime. I hobble down the side street and steer the walker into the lane and no one pays any attention. Passing nannies ignore me. Dog walkers smile and nod hello and yank their yappy animals out of my way. The fieldstone wall that surrounds this place has a rear gate set into a recess off the lane. I can slip

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into the recess and not be seen from either end of the alley. I can wait there until I'm sure the coast is clear before I put my key into the thick silver lock and slip into the yard. I bought the lock. The people who live in this house spend the cold months somewhere warm. Maybe Florida. They have an alarm system in the house and a security patrol checks the windows and doors nightly, but they don't check the back gate or yard. Still, I hide the walker well in the shrubs inside the stone fence before I climb the wooden ladder to my fort. Some rich kids must have had fun up here. Years ago.

It took me a couple of trips on the streetcar, watching for beer stores and tool rentals, before I found Rose's stop. There was an elementary school on the north side of the road, behind a half-inch tempered plate-glass public waiting booth with a cold metal bench inside. I waited in there until several streetcars passed and people in the schoolyard began looking at me strangely. I didn't want to be taken for one of those sick bastards who likes children too much, so I left. I just liked Rose too much. The third time I went there I only waited a short time before she got off the car and walked down the block. She went in the main door of a four-story apartment building on the right without a glance behind. I waited a good ten minutes before I went in and saw that R. Goldberg lived in Apartment 2A. It was at the front, on the left side of the building when you looked at it from the street. Across the road was a single-story auto-body shop with a large green neon sign that rose above the roof level and said "The Dent-ist." It wasn't difficult to climb on an abandoned car at the back to the flat graveled roof and hide behind the sign. At dark, Rose turned her lights on. She had a nice place—neat, like I'd imagined, with a little cloth mat in the middle of the kitchen table and some dried flowers in a vase on it. Just like we'd have done. She had two big bookcases on the far wall. The windows looked like steel-framed, single-glazed, double-diamond glass, which would be cold in the winter. The blinds were made out of reeds or something and they wouldn't keep out the cold. Before she lowered them I squished her head, but it didn't feel right. Squishing heads was our joke. Rose's and mine.

Bergeron has moved out from behind his bookcase now. He's carrying a thick hardcover book with an orange and white dust cover and leafing through it as he walks toward a chair—a big, overstuffed leather wing chair with shiny brass upholstery nails down the front of the arms and around the tall back. He's hearing something because he's stuck his finger in the book to keep his place and he's looking toward the dining room. He's saying something back now and then he's sitting down, putting his feet up on a matching footstool and crossing his ankles. I'm taking my hand out of my mole-

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skin pocket. I'm still hungry. I can almost read the book title through the scope.

I watched Rose from behind the sign three or four days a week from then on. Sometimes she'd study at the kitchen table and sometimes she'd have friends over and they'd laugh and share bottles of wine and forget to lower the blinds. I took to making my hand into a pistol, with my index finger extended and my thumb raised, and sighting down my finger to her friends' heads, then lowering my thumb and making a little *pew* sound as if I had a silencer barrel. It was better than squishing. Less of a joke. I never used it on Rose until the night Bergeron showed up with a bottle of wine and some flowers and kissed her again and again until she stood up to lower the blinds. Her front buttons were undone. I shot both of them with my hand and went home. *Pew. Pew.*

There she is now. She's wearing a caftan or whatever they call those long robes. A smoking jacket and a caftan. Jesus. She has a tray with tea things on it and some kind of dessert. A car with a light on top is pulling up in front of the driveway gate and the guard steps forward with his hand on his hip. Rose says something toward the hall and two figures leave the house and get into the cab. Cook and Emma. Rose sets the tray down on a table beside Bergeron's chair. He stops reading, looks at her and smiles, then takes his feet off the stool and pats it so she'll sit there.

I didn't flunk out because I was following Rose around or thinking about her all the time. I just wasn't about to become a lawyer or a politician and with Rose gone I had no idea what I was doing there. So it wasn't hard to stop. I worked a few jobs over the years but never found anything that involved me much until Windoscapes—you've probably heard of them. They're best known for making those huge industrial picture windows for libraries and museums and offices, but they have a residential line as well. They had an opening for a salesman, which I certainly was not, but I took it for the money and the benefits. I did my homework. I usually do. Within a few months I knew everything about the business, about the competition, about all kinds of windows and doors—wooden frames, extruded aluminum, composites, vinyl clad and solid vinyl—and all types—sliders, casements, sashes, bows, double sashes, bays, self-cleaners, triple-format hinges, e-glass, solar reflection . . . you name it. I was well known around the factory, and even at the conventions, for what I knew. Just ask Dave. Dave'll know that. Where's Dave? But I wasn't famous for great sales and I'd been told enough times that I'd better move some product or think about another career.

She's serving him dessert, for Christ's sake. Like some . . . some waitress. Like Emma. She's cutting little slices of something with creamy stuff on top of it and putting them on a little flowered

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plate. And he's smiling at her and touching her face, tracing her jaw line with his finger. His slicked-back hair shines in the reading light when he leans forward to accept a little silver fork. I wiggle my shoulders and stretch my right leg again.

I finally engineered the sale that would guarantee me my job even if I never sold anything again. These things take time, and I'd been hitting on this government purchasing guy for months, telling him all about Windoscapes and how we could provide anything he wanted and beat the price of anyone else, especially Extrusco. I promised him we'd beat them by ten percent. Finally he invited me to a special meeting to make a pitch to provide glass for the new library, which had finally been approved by the Ministry, that architect's fantasy transparent-pyramid project down on Stanford. Things happened so quickly that day they didn't make sense until later. I was pumped and ready. I had a guaranteed supply of 7.22-mil solar-controlled, low-E, anti-ray glass in anodized thermally-broken aluminum frames with a sixty-minute fire rating that far exceeded local codes. I bought a new suit. I was there early. A secretary told me where to sit and wait because the Minister was very busy. Then the guy from Extrusco showed up. Before I could ask why, Rose came out of the office and walked by me without even looking. She looked different somehow. Before I could call out her name, a male voice yelled that we should come in, and the secretary made hurry-up flutters with her hand. The Minister was very busy.

I didn't know Bergeron was the Minister. I went first. I didn't do my best. I don't think he remembered me from school, or maybe he did. I didn't remind him. All the time I was talking he looked at his hands and his pencil, and smiled at the Extrusco guy. He never once looked me in the eye. Like when he was driving. Extrusco got the job and I lost mine. The guys from the factory said they'd miss me.

That's when I bought the gun, scope and all. They lived out in the country then. I'm not much for politics or papers so I didn't know Bergeron and Rose had married or that Bergeron had become a local politician and then a Minister in the latest Cabinet shuffle. They owned the biggest and best gingerbread Victorian house in the medium-sized town that was the center of their political world. They had a law office together on the Main Street called Bergeron and Goldberg. Partners in Law, it read. Partners in life, as well. The office was too exposed for my purposes, and they never worked much past dark anyway, so I chose the house. It backed onto a lane like the one they have now, now that he's even more important. There was no need to lock the back gate in a small town where you knew everyone and everyone knew you. I could walk right in and squat in the shadow of an old glass green-

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house (eighth-inch clear, untempered single-diamond) and see them watching TV and walking around the house. They had no kids. Rose's nose was smaller. That's what was different. I shot him with the finger gun that first time, but, like the squishing thing with Rose, it didn't make me feel any better. It wasn't satisfying. So I bought the rifle I have now and sat in their backyard, just out of the light pouring through their new Extrusco replacement vinyl-clad double casements. I could pan between them using the scope and I could put Bergeron's head in the cross hairs and squeeze the trigger. There was a calibrated resistance on the finger, then a solid, satisfying *click*. I had no bullets. I wasn't crazy. It just felt a lot more satisfying to see each of them in a real crosshair sight and pull a real trigger than to use a stupid finger gun. Or squish heads like a child. Squeeze. *Click*. Pan. *Click*.

He's standing up now at a table crowded with bottles. With little silver tongs he's moving ice cubes from a silver bowl into two cut-crystal glasses. Now he's holding up a bottle and asking her something, flashing his satin sleeve, arching his groomed eyebrows so his forehead looks like a washboard. She's raising her hand, thumb and forefinger extended, a small gap between them. Just a little alcohol. The circuit guard shuffles past, slipping on the icy path they've worn like nags on a longe line. Bergeron looks up. Maybe he's seeing the guard or realizing the curtains are open. She's beside him now, taking her drink. Kissing him on the cheek. He's smiling and kissing her back and they're clinking glasses. It's as if I can hear the sound. They sip.

"Oh dear," she says, drink spilled on her robe, glass set down, fingers to pursed lips, then both palms raised and formed into cartoon pistols aimed playfully at his happy face. "Too much scotch for me." The cross hairs meet inside his mouth. The scope blurs as she walks in front. I look away, to the side, to see her coming toward me, toward the curtains, laughing over her shoulder. He's laughing, too. She's pointing down and dabbing at her wet robe, reminding him of something funny. Something they share. Something wet. Maybe me. I pan slowly with her as she reaches up to draw the curtains. *Squish. Pew. Click.*

Bang. Pan. *Bang.* ●

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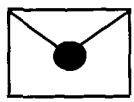

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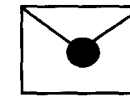

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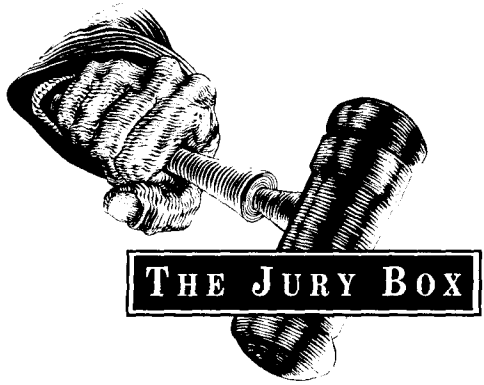

by Jon L. Breen

Vin Packer, one of the best paperback-original crime writers to emerge in the 1950s under the Gold Medal imprint, is a significant American novelist regardless of genre or format. Her probing accounts of the roots of crime are richly detailed snapshots of their times, unconventional, intensely readable, and devoid of heroes, villains, or pat solutions. A long overdue revival of her work comes in trade-paper reprints from two small presses. Her first and most famous novel, *Spring Fire* (Cleis, $12.95), shocking in 1952 for its lesbian theme and damning portrayal of college sorority life, is completely believable until the unconvincing ending, an editorial requirement Packer explains in her introduction to this edition. (Things start to go awry when the Dean-of-Women ex machina appears.) Of more direct interest to crime-fiction readers is the pairing of *Something in the Shadows/Intimate Victims* (Stark House, $19.95), two of her best novels from 1961 and 1962 respectively, also with an enlightening new introduction by the author, along with my own essay on her work reprinted from the 1989 collection *Murder Off the Rack.*

Packer's most recent book, under her birth name of Marijane Meaker, is the fine 2003 memoir *Highsmith: A Romance of the 1950's* (Cleis, $14.95), about her relationship with the equally unconventional author of *Strangers on a Train, The Talented Mr. Ripley,* and a long string of novels, plus many short stories in *EQMM* and elsewhere. Now Patricia Highsmith's final novel, published in Great Britain in the year of her death, 1995, but unaccountably rejected by her American publishers, finally has its first U.S. edition.

*** Patricia Highsmith: *Small g,* Norton, $24.95. The action is centered on the habitués of a Zurich bar, designated in guidebooks with a small *g,* meaning its clientele is partially but not

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entirely gay. Though it begins with a murder and occasionally pretends to be a detective story, it is more romance than crime novel and more upbeat than one would expect from the author's reputation. The ending is something of a letdown, but the characters, background, and expert prose reward the reader. (Now available in trade paperback is the Edgar winner for best biographical or critical volume of 2003, Andrew Wilson's excellent *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia Highsmith* [Bloomsbury, $18.95].)

**** Steven Saylor: *The Judgment of Caesar,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95. An ageing Gordianus the Finder visits Cleopatra's Egypt, where his ailing wife Bethesda seeks a cure in the waters of the Nile. He also encounters Julius Caesar, to whom his disowned son Meto is an aide, and King Ptolemy, a quite different and more formidable figure than found in other accounts. Fans of this superb multi-volume saga, much the best of the various Roman detective series, won't mind that the clever mystery plot doesn't come until the last third of the book.

*** Larry Beinhart: *The Librarian,* Nation Books, $15.95. The title character is David Goldberg, whose part-time job organizing the memorabilia of an elderly billionaire turns into a battle to save the United States from election-year dirty tricks on the grandest possible scale. While the characters are fictitious, the parallels to the current scene are anything but coincidental. The ultimate test of a partisan political satire timed to precede a Presidential election is whether it will be worth picking up when the election is over. Beinhart is an enjoyable enough writer to give a qualified yes, but your pleasure in this conspiracy thriller will be greatest if you share the author's liberal politics. (The breeding farm scene struck me as ridiculous on first reading, but I am advised by the Jockey Club that a Preakness winning stallion being bred to a mare in the Northern hemisphere in late October, though highly unlikely, is not impossible.)

*** Martin Edwards: *The Coffin Trail,* Poisoned Pen, $24.95. Daniel Kind, who shares the late Robin W. Winks's view of the historian's role as detective, has an ulterior motive when he leaves Oxford to set up housekeeping in the Lake District with his journalist girlfriend. Some years before, his estranged policeman father investigated the murder of a young girl, conveniently blamed on an autistic youth who was a boyhood friend of Daniel. As the local residents edgily deal with Daniel's presence and the reopening of the cold case by his father's former partner and protégée Hannah Scarlett, Edwards shows us a consummate pro at work.

*** Lee Goldberg: *The Walk,* Five Star, $25.95. The long-feared major earthquake has

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hit Southern California and network TV executive Marty Slack sets out on a perilous walk home from a downtown Los Angeles location shoot to the San Fernando Valley, accompanied part of the way by a macho private eye trying to pitch a series idea in the midst of urban catastrophe. Filtering grim reality through a show-biz perspective produces a narrative both harrowing and funny. There are enough clues for readers more alert than I to anticipate the final twist.

*** Brent Hartinger: *The Last Chance Texaco,* HarperTempest, $15.99. Fifteen-year-old Lucy Pitt, narrator of this short, positive, and compelling young-adult novel, comes to a group home for problem kids in the foster-care system, knowing the next stop if she gets in trouble is the dreaded Eat-Their-Young Island. The combination of an unusual and realistically observed setting and a well-structured find-the-arsonist-who-wants-to-close-the-home whodunit offers enough meat for adult readers, who should have no qualms about recommending the book to young teens unless they balk at the occasional appearance of four-letter words unknown to the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew.

** Cynthia Riggs: *Jack in the Pulpit,* St. Martin's Minotaur/Dunne, $22.95. A surprising series of sudden deaths on Martha's Vineyard, attributed to flu or other natural causes, gets the attention of unofficial deputy sheriff Victoria Trumbull, an active and energetic 92-year-old who (in an age-appropriate event) must give up her driver's license after a double assault on a Meals On Wheels van. The characters, setting, and horticultural details commend this to cozy readers, but the final exposition scene loses its point when the reader already knows both the killer's identity and the main clue.

** Joel Goldman: *Cold Truth,* Pinnacle, $6.99. Kansas City defense attorney Lou Mason (audacious choice of surname!) represents troubled young woman Jordan Hackett, accused of murdering radio shrink Dr. Gina Davenport. The crisp early pages suggest a tight, fast-paced legal mystery in the tradition of Erle Stanley Gardner or Harold Q. Masur, but Goldman seems constrained by demands of the market to pad a good 200-page book to 400 plus.

The 1947 murder of Hollywood show-biz wannabe Elizabeth Short is among the most intriguing real-life mysteries of the past century. Steve Hodel's 2003 book *Black Dahlia Avenger,* an Edgar nominee in the true-crime category, made a convincing case against the author's father but left unanswered questions. Now the trade paperback edition ($14.95, Harper Perennial) offers substantial additional content, plus a foreword in which James Ellroy, who wrote one of the most famous fictionalizations of the case, declares himself a convert to Hodel's theory.

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

MELUSINE

by Martin Edwards

On the hillside, bodies were burning. As Jason drove down into the valley, he glanced across and saw the outlines of the bloated carcasses. Their stiffened legs protruded through the flames and pointed to the sky. On a fresh June morning, smoke and fire had turned the sky a strange purple hue that, until the coming of the plague, he had never seen before. A steamy white vapour hung close to the ground. He kept the windows of the van wound up, but the stench from the corpses on the funeral pyre was inescapable. It choked his sinuses and made his gorge rise.

The fields were deserted. Cows and sheep should be everywhere, but only their ghosts remained. All the footpaths were barred with tape and official notices; ramblers had been asked to stay at home. The winding route to Sidebottom's Farm was closed, a red sign blocking the middle of the lane. KEEP OUT—FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE.

The grey stone cottages where a couple of the farm workers and their families had lived were shuttered and silent. When blisters were found on the tongue of one of Mick Sidebottom's bullocks, the men had been given forty-eight hours to pack their bags and leave.

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Folk said it was worse than going on evacuation, during the last war. This time the enemy drifted through the air, silent, ruthless, and invisible.

His head was pounding and he kept taking the bends in the road too fast. At least there was no other traffic around; the Ministry kept warning against "nonessential movement." As he had driven through the smoke and vapour up top, a couple of tiny patches of unburned flesh had landed on the bonnet of his van. He clipped a hedge as he skimmed round a tight bend, but only when he struck a pothole did the bits fall off. At last he slowed as he reached the disinfected matting stretched over a cattle grid. In the distance he could see Gordon Clegg power-washing his tractor for the umpteenth time. Anything to keep the plague at bay.

In addition to being a leading crime-fiction writer and a practicing lawyer, Martin Edwards is the editor of ten anthologies of crime stories. The latest of his eight novels, entitled *The Coffin Trail*, has just been released by Poisoned Pen Press in the U.S. Set in England's beautiful Lake District, it launches a new series starring a female detective chief inspector. Mr. Edwards's new tale for us revisits the U.K.'s harrowing ordeal with foot-and-mouth disease.

Five minutes later, the squat church tower came into view. He glanced at his watch. Twelve o'clock. Time for a quick drink at the Wheatsheaf before he called home for half an hour. He had done enough killing and maybe he'd done enough drinking, too, but alcohol helped in a way nothing else did.

Dave Sharpe's rusty Vauxhall was the only other vehicle in the pub car park. He hesitated and thought about going straight to the house. Part of him wanted not to see Dave, not to speak to him, not to have to think about him ever again. But at least if he was swilling beer, he wasn't doing anything more dangerous. Jason took a breath and headed for the saloon.

Sally Binks was behind the bar, wearing a low-cut pink top and flirting with Dave. Apart from a couple of old men in the corner, no one else was in.

"Usual, love?"

He nodded. "And one for him."

"Cheers, mate," Dave said.

Funny, that. They had disliked each other for years, and still they called themselves mates. They had met on the first day of school at the age of five and on that very morning, Dave had pulled his hair and made him cry, then pretended it was all some kind of joke. As they grew up together, anyone listening to their lazy banter would never have a clue about what went on inside

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their heads. Jason wondered if he actually hated Dave. He never cared to analyse his feelings, but he thought probably he did hate him. For many reasons, not least because Melanie had said last week that he looked like Kurt Cobain.

"All right?" he asked.

As Sally moved to pick up the tankards, Dave reluctantly shifted his gaze from her cleavage and gave a shrug. "Feller from Padgett's was in here a few minutes ago. He said that when the rain came after they buried the sheep out Settle way, the bodies exploded. They exploded, literally exploded. He said, if you watched the ground, it looked as though the earth was sweating blood."

"Wicked," Sally said as she pulled the levers. Her breasts wobbled, hypnotising Dave again. "Wicked."

In the corner of the bar, the television was murmuring. The midday news. A government spokesman, carefully compassionate in a Paul Smith suit, was promising that everything was getting better. The detail of his explanation was lost as the old men in the corner hooted with scorn.

" 'Back under control'?" one of them said. "Tell that to Jack Wilson's widow. No wonder the poor bastard hung himself. Took him and his dad forty years to build that herd."

"Aye," his toothless companion said.

"Nothing even wrong with the animals. Slaughter on suspicion, that's what it was."

The other man supped his pint. "Aye."

"See that bugger?" the old man said, jerking a thumb at the screen. "Pity he's never had blood and brains splashed all over him."

"Aye."

Dave winced. He was a postman and his work was already finished for the day. He'd never worked on the land and was one of the few people Jason knew whose life had not been touched by the coming of the plague.

When Jason said nothing, Dave nudged him in the ribs. "So how are you, mate? And how's the missus?"

His wolfish features gave nothing away, but was there a touch of mockery in his tone? Jason thought so. It wasn't just his imagination.

"I'm all right. So's Melanie."

"Great. Glad to hear you're looking after Mel. Did I ever tell you how I used to fancy her when she was a kid?"

Dave would have fancied Godzilla if it had worn a skirt. His late mother had fondly described him as *incorrigible,* a favourite word. He'd finished up getting Cheryl Stringer pregnant and marrying her before the baby was born. It wasn't in his nature to do the decent thing, so everyone assumed that it was because he'd never found anyone with a sexual appetite to match Cheryl's. Jason had

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never cared for Cheryl—she was so in-your-face—but these days she was proving impossible to avoid. In January she had started working as a classroom assistant at Melanie's school and the two couples had fallen into a habit of seeing each other regularly. Melanie said that Cheryl was fun, but Jason couldn't help wondering if it was an excuse, an opportunity for his wife to spend more time with Dave. She said that he made her laugh.

"Yeah, you told me."

" 'Course, she was too posh for me. For all of us. No offence, mate, but I never figured out how you managed to catch her eye."

He'd often asked himself that very question, never quite worked out the answer.

Dave drained his glass. "Same again?"

Jason hadn't finished his drink, but his headache was no better and he decided he'd had enough. Especially of Dave. He pushed the tankard across the counter to Sally and shook his head. "Another time."

"Off to kill a few more?" Dave mimicked the Sundance Kid firing his six-shooter.

"Later."

Dave treated him to a knowing leer. Jason could smell the ale on his breath. "Popping back to the nest for a quickie, then? Don't blame you, mate. Give my love to Mel, now, don't forget."

Jason loathed the easy familiarity of that *Mel*. He turned away, not trusting himself to answer. When he reached home, Melanie was in the front room. She used it as a study and was tapping on the keyboard of her computer. It was half-term, supposed to be a holiday, but she always found plenty to do. As he walked into the room, she glanced over her shoulder. "You left early this morning."

"I tried not to disturb you."

"I heard the van when you set off."

"Sorry."

"Doesn't matter. How did it go?"

"Well, you know. The usual."

He'd never been good with words, not like Melanie. Anyway, how could you describe what he saw, what he felt? Nothing could have prepared him for this. The terror on the face of the beasts, the staring eyes, the hoarse panting, the blood seeping from the wounds where they had, in panic, crashed through strands of barbed wire.

"Ready for a sandwich? There's cheese in the fridge."

She turned back to her computer. He wondered if he should go up behind her and kiss her on the neck. At one time, that would have melted her in a moment, but they had been married four years. Four years! Time to start a family, though she had always been reluctant. Weren't teachers supposed to like kids? But she never behaved like all the other girls he'd grown up with. Always,

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Melanie was different.

"Good morning?"

"Not bad," she said, still focusing on the text on the screen. "There's such a lot of work to do with the national curriculum. By the way, I wouldn't mind a sandwich myself."

In the kitchen, Jason found the bread knife. He hadn't expected marriage to be like this. What had he expected? He wasn't sure, perhaps he'd never thought clearly enough about it before asking Melanie to share his life. Marriage was what people did, but he had assumed that, because Melanie was different, their life together would somehow be different from everyone else's. After all, she was his fairy bride.

He ran his forefinger along the serrated edge of the knife, remembering how young Kevin Nolan had slit the throat of a terrified lamb the previous afternoon. The lamb was healthy, like all the other creatures down Beggarman's Lane, but that was not enough to guarantee survival. Tests on blood and tissue taken from animals at an adjoining farm had proved positive and the rules of contiguous culling meant that their neighbours had to die.

"I wouldn't mind a cup of tea while you're at it," Melanie called.

She talked like a woman of fifty, he thought, switching on the kettle. Not that she looked a day over twenty. Her face didn't have a single line. Three years older, he'd only been vaguely aware of her existence during her teens. He'd never spoken to her until the night of a dance in the village hall, a couple of weeks after she finished at college. He'd watched her, with her friends, and found himself hypnotised. She seemed delicate and aloof from their chatter, a slim, almost boyish figure in a simple dress lacking all the slits and embellishments favoured by her companions. Something prompted him to talk to her, even though he had watched her reject overtures from a number of the other young men. Including Dave Sharpe.

A couple of months later, when their unlikely romance was turning into something more than a fling, he tried to explain how he admired her, how he loved to watch her when she was watching something or someone else. There was a stillness about her that entranced him, and something more: an air of not belonging that was neither loneliness nor isolation, but a sort of serene uniqueness with which he had fallen hopelessly in love.

Of course, he found it impossible to describe his feelings. At first she had teased him, but when she realised that he meant to be deadly serious, her tone had softened and she had said that she thought she knew what he meant. "I never wanted to be one of the crowd," she said, squeezing his hand.

"You're not," he said. "You're almost—well, not quite human."

"Thanks a lot," she laughed, withdrawing her hand in mock indignation. "Some sort of alien from outer space, am I?"

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"No, no," he said, his voice becoming hoarse with embarrassment. "But you're not like Dawn and Becky and all the rest. You're not like anyone I ever met before."

"I'll take that as a compliment, shall I?"

"You better had," he said. "I want to marry you."

To his amazement, she said yes. No play-acting, no messing. He could not believe his good fortune. Why him? In the past, he'd done all right with the girls, even if he would never be in Dave Sharpe's league. At least he was muscular and fit, and poor tubby little Hannah Stott had once told him that his hazel eyes were the most beautiful she had ever seen. He was never mean with money and no woman would ever feel the slap of his hand, which was more than you could say for many men, even in this day and age. But Melanie had a brain and wanted to use it. She could make something of herself.

As for Jason, he didn't think he'd ever find a job that truly suited him. Perhaps his old Maths master had been right in branding him as lazy. It went deeper than a visceral loathing of algebra. Above all, Jason admired beauty. He admired it in a landscape, in a summer sunset, in the face and body of a gorgeous woman. How easy to become lost in rapture, to pass the hours in quiet adoration. But there was no beauty in work. Routine bored him and so he moved from job to job. He had been a garage mechanic, a gardener, a farmhand, a butcher's assistant, a slaughterman at an abattoir.

A week before the wedding, he asked Melanie if she'd ever loved anyone else. Idle curiosity, no hidden agenda—but for some reason, his inquisitiveness upset her out of all proportion. She was usually calm, unworldly even, and he was surprised to see her eyes filling with tears. "Listen," she said gently as he stammered an apology. "It doesn't matter. But you must promise me one thing."

"Anything," he said. His worst nightmare was that she would pull out of their engagement. Twice already he had dreamed of her failing to show at the church on the day itself and of his mortification as everyone in the congregation stared at him in horrified sympathy.

"You must keep this promise and never break it." She thought for a moment. "I don't suppose you ever heard of Melusine?"

He shook his head. She often treated him as a pupil; it amused her to teach him things. He didn't mind; he was content simply to let her words wash over him, not absorbing the lessons, just luxuriating in her company.

"Melusine was a beautiful fairy but she had a terrible secret." A faraway look came into her eyes. "One day each week, she became half woman, half serpent. A man fell in love with her and she agreed to marry him, on one condition, that he never saw her on a Saturday."

"What happened?"

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"Someone poisoned his mind, and said that was the day Melusine met her lover. When her husband broke his word and found out the truth, he lost everything. Including Melusine."

"I don't get it."

"Listen, I'm like Melusine. I ask just one thing of you. You must promise never to be jealous."

"So you've got a terrible secret?" His tone was jokey, but her flights of fancy baffled him. "It's not the new vicar, is it? I saw him across the street the other day. Quite a hunk. The church shouldn't allow it."

She put a finger to her lips. "Shh, darling. No, I don't fancy the vicar, but I do want you to trust me. Now, are you going to promise or not?"

"You really want me to?"

She nodded seriously and he realised that he must not get this wrong. Not now, when he was committed to her. Even though he did not know why, he had to make his promise.

"I swear."

Her face broke into the loveliest smile and within moments he forgot about Melusine. In the years that followed, there was no hint that Melanie might have a terrible secret. She did not smoke, did not drink, and she had to be persuaded into any bedroom games that were not pretty conventional. Even now, he told himself he was crazy to believe that she was deceiving him.

He took the sandwich and cup of tea in to her. "Here you are."

"Thanks. So when are you going back?"

"Five minutes."

"I'll have your tea ready by half six."

"Great."

"No problem."

She was still glued to the computer screen. He drank in the sight of her. Her hair was the same rich chestnut shade he had always loved, her skin was as white and unsullied as when they first kissed. Yet something had changed. He was no longer special to her; she had stopped trying to educate him to understand what appealed to her. Nowadays he featured in her life in much the same way as their shabby old furniture or the framed views of Brimham Rocks that hung on the wall of their living room.

"See you later, then."

"Mmmmm."

He closed the door quietly. As he rooted in his jacket pocket for the keys to the van, he wondered who had stolen her affections. Dave Sharpe? Checking the map in his glove compartment, he told himself for the hundredth time that life was not so cruel, that the only reason he was obsessed with the fear that Dave was cuckolding him was because such a betrayal would be too hard to bear.

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Heading for the next Infected Premises, he couldn't rid his mind of Dave's gloating smile. As lads, they had played rugby together in winter and cricket in the summer. They had so much in common and people regarded them as bosom buddies. Dave was fun and he was generous, but there were moments when the mask of good nature slipped. Taking a shortcut along a single-track lane, Jason remembered a game one July when he and Dave had batted in partnership. It was one of those days of which cricketers dream. The ball kept speeding off his bat to the boundary. Even the best bowlers on the other side were helpless in the face of such a sustained attack. When he was one run short of his century, Dave called him for a quick single. The ball was in the hands of the cover point fielder, a farmer with a famously strong arm. Jason hesitated for a second, then put his head down and ran. His stumps were shattered when he was two yards short of the safety of the crease at the far end. In the bar afterwards, Dave had bought the drinks and said he took the blame. Jason argued with him, saying that if he had set off straightaway, he would have made his ground. But secretly, he knew that Dave was right. It was a reckless call, his fault. Perhaps he had been too anxious to see Jason achieve his moment of glory. Or perhaps he had wanted to deny it to him forever. Jason had never scored a ton since.

When he arrived at the site, the man from the Ministry came up as he was slipping on his white biohazard overall and rubber boots. "You took your time."

Jason's wave took in Kevin Nolan standing by a picket fence, supping Coke from a can, and Bob Garrett sitting in the cab of his van, reading *The Sun*. "Better things to do with my day than spend hours hanging around here, waiting for the word."

"Look here, you know the score. We have to get the go-ahead from the vet. But if you keep buggering off, we don't know where we are."

Jason shrugged. He was freelance, and right now the Ministry needed as much help as it could get. Three million animals didn't kill themselves. None of the slaughtermen liked the Ministry blokes. They were pen-pushers, more comfortable in a warm office than on the land. Most of the slaughtermen had learned their trade on farms, they were countrymen. They didn't have to like what they were doing or the people who paid them to do it.

Bob Garrett jumped down from his cab. "Eh up, pal. Wipe that smirk off your face. We all know you've been off giving your old lady a good seeing-to."

Garrett's ex-wife lived across the road from Jason. The previous summer, Jason had spotted him eyeing up Melanie when he brought back the kids and she was sunbathing on the lawn. No matter how many times he told himself that other men were jealous of him, it never helped, never made him feel good. What was

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wrong with him? Why did he feel damaged by the way they lusted after his lovely fairy wife? And things were getting worse. He couldn't shake off the fear that people were laughing at him behind his back. They knew something that he did not.

Kevin Nolan was sniggering, but Jason didn't rise to the bait. "How many are we doing this afternoon?"

The man from the Ministry consulted his clipboard. "Eighty-five cattle. Not a big job. I just spoke to the vet. We should be set to go in a couple of minutes."

Jason opened the door of his van and picked up the gun from the passenger seat. "Better get ready, then."

Their task did not take long. They were using captive bolt guns rather than rifles. A blank cartridge fired a four-inch steel bolt into the animal's skull and a spring retracted the bolt. Once the animal had been stunned in this way, it was pithed, by means of a steel rod being thrust through the hole and into the brain.

As usual, not everything went according to plan. One bull had to be shot and pithed four times. The more he fought for life, the more Jason's temper frayed. What was the point of struggling? The bull wasn't sick, but it had to die anyway. Those were the orders. He wanted it over as quickly as possible and resented the doomed bull for delaying the inevitable. The more time you had to think about what you were doing, the worse it was for everyone.

"Where next?" he asked the man from the Ministry.

"There's a couple of dozen lambs penned up the other side of the barn at the end of the lane. You and Garrett head off there now, I'll catch up once I've had a word with the farmer."

The farmer had turned up during the killings. He'd stayed over by the fence, watching the destruction of his herd. Jason could tell the man was close to tears. In the early days, he had talked to the farmers whose herds he shot, tried to console them. But what could you say? Most people round here reckoned that it would be enough to vaccinate the animals and claimed the culling was unnecessary. But the powers-that-be in London thought differently, and that was what mattered.

Jason held the lambs while Bob Garrett shot them. He took care not to look at the faces of the creatures, settling his gaze instead on fields in the middle distance. The countryside was full of death, but Nature didn't seem to notice. Ragged robin, elderflowers, and foxgloves still bloomed.

"These fellers in the Thatched Tavern were talking last night," Garrett said. "They'd killed fifteen hundred sheep and cattle on one farm and then they were told to disinfect round a jackdaw's nest for conservation reasons. Christ, would you bloody believe it?"

Jason grunted. Perhaps all wars were like this; everyone had an anecdote to tell. Live lambs suffocating to death under the corpses

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of sheep with cut throats. Wagons driven by young squaddies carrying the carcasses to the burial pits and leaking blood all along the country lanes. Each storyteller liked to spin a yarn more absurd or more horrific than the last.

"You all right?" Garrett asked. "You look—sort of glazed. On a promise for tonight, then?"

Jason felt his chest tightening. He wanted to grab the man, shake him by the neck until he choked, demanding to know why he kept talking about Melanie. What was going on—something that he, the poor old husband, was the last to know?

He strode away, unable to trust himself to speak. Surely he was wrong in suspecting Dave. What about Garrett himself? He was an older man and Jason supposed he was good-looking if you like that sort of thing. Or even Kevin Nolan? Kevin's last year at the school had been Melanie's first as a teacher. Jason remembered her saying that he was a rascal, but somehow she couldn't find it in her heart not to like him. That was the trouble with Melanie. She never saw through people; she was too naive to realise that the men she liked were only interested in one thing.

"Where are you going?" Garrett demanded.

Jason pointed to the heap of bodies on the ground. "I've had enough of this."

"If you don't wait for whatsisname to show up and sign you off, there'll be hell to pay."

Jason shrugged. "So what?"

He'd walked away from jobs before. Even as he clambered out of his overall and boots, his headache was easing. Garrett gave a disgusted shake of the head. Kevin Nolan was grinning. Surely, *surely* Melanie couldn't have slept with that lad?

Even as he sped back to the village, he told himself that he couldn't confront her. It wasn't so much that he lacked the balls to do it, but he remembered what she had said about Melusine. He dared not demand to know if she had taken a lover. What he needed was reassurance.

It could still be okay, he thought, as he jolted over the disinfectant mat. We can start again. Soon, maybe, she'll be ready to try for a family. That will make all the difference.

"I didn't expect you back so soon," Melanie said when he opened the door of the study.

"I've jacked it in," he said. "The money's good, but I'm sick of the smell and the faces of the animals as I kill them."

She swallowed. "What are you going to do?"

"Dunno. I'll find something."

"But there's no work! Haven't you heard? The countryside is closed. No tourists, no trade, nothing. People are going bankrupt right, left, and centre."

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"All right, it might take awhile." He thought for a moment. "What's up? Don't you want me under your feet all day?"

"It's not that!" Two pink spots appeared in her cheeks. It wasn't like her to be flustered. "We can't go on like this."

"Me spending cash we haven't got at the Wheatsheaf, you mean?"

"Don't shout! I know you need to unwind. . . ."

"Too right," he said, and marched out of the house.

Ten minutes later, nursing a pint in the saloon, he was wondering if he'd been too rough with her. They hardly ever argued; neither of them was a natural combatant. When Sally asked him if he was okay, he bit her head off.

"Why? Don't I look okay?"

"I only asked," she said in an injured tone. "And if you want to know the truth, you look as miserable as sin."

It dawned on him that he hadn't been happy for a long time. Not since before the coming of the plague, that was for sure. Maybe he should offer Melanie an olive branch. It wasn't a Yorkshireman's habit to say sorry, but he wasn't proud. He would do anything if it would help to recapture the love they had shared at one time. Maybe even work out his contract with the Ministry. He pulled his mobile out of his pocket and dialed home. He would apologise right now, and then go back and see what else he could do to make amends.

The number was engaged. He tried again a couple of minutes later, with the same result. Her parents were dead and she seldom socialised. The head teacher was on holiday and her two closest colleagues had taken a party of pupils to France. Who could she be talking to?

"Dave not in tonight?" he asked.

Sally shook her head to show that she bore no grudge for his sharp tone earlier. "He said that he would be busy in the garden until it got dark. He's building a rockery, you know."

Oh, really? Jason's head was swimming and it wasn't just down to the beer. "Same again, then."

As darkness fell, Dave showed up. He spotted Jason and gave him a wicked grin. "What's up, mate? Abandoned your old lady? I dunno, you'd better take care. You know, women are like cars. You've got to keep their engines tuned."

"You've been looking after Cheryl?" a fat man at the bar demanded.

Dave found this amusing. "Matter of fact, I've been out in the garden."

"Oh yeah? Planting a few seeds?"

The fat man and Dave roared with laughter and fell into ribald conversation. Jason sat glowering and monosyllabic for a couple of rounds before summoning up the energy to head for home. If Dave

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had been with Mel, she would need time to have a bath, make herself decent. He didn't want a confrontation this evening. He had to think things through.

Although he could hold his beer better than most, he was swaying slightly as he walked through his front door. All the lights were out. It wasn't late, but Melanie must be in bed. She would probably say she needed the sleep, after he had woken her so inconsiderately that morning. Perhaps she was already fast asleep; she was bound to be tired.

On tiptoe, he made his way into the study. At night she left her mobile on her desk. He lifted it up and checked the list of recent calls. It was the first time in the marriage that he had ever snooped on her, but he couldn't help it. A familiar set of digits came up at once. His guts lurched. The number belonged to Dave Sharpe.

He started to climb the stairs, wanting to have it out with Melanie, but halfway up he changed his mind and went back down again. Better leave it until morning. He couldn't sleep beside her, though. Not after what she'd done. *Dave Sharpe.* His thoughts were as gridlocked as an urban motorway, but he could still guess what had happened. Dave and Melanie must have had a fling, but he'd two-timed her and got Cheryl pregnant. Perhaps Melanie had been too stingy in bed for him.

Melanie must have lost her heart to Dave. Yes, that explained everything. How she had fallen for Dave's mate on the rebound, her lapses into frigidity, even the story about Melusine. She did have a terrible secret after all.

He spent the night dozing fitfully on the lumpy sofa in their living room. At about four he woke from a nightmare. A dead bullock had risen like a zombie from the pile of carcasses and come towards him, intent upon taking revenge. The room was chilly in the middle of the night, but sweat was sticking his shirt to his chest. His head was pounding and the stale taste of beer lingered in his mouth.

Why had she done this to him? Dave was no fool; he must have picked up a hint that Melanie still held a torch for him. For all Cheryl's famously voracious appetites, he wouldn't have been able to resist the opportunity to be able to turn Jason into a cuckold. Humiliating his old "friend" at the same time as enjoying the sweet pleasures of Melanie's tender flesh would double the fun.

At ten to seven, he heard the alarm shrilling in the bedroom. Moments later, Melanie came hurrying down the stairs, calling his name. When she saw him, her face turned crimson. In that instant, he knew that she knew he knew.

"What are you doing?" Her voice was croaky, uncertain.

"You should have told me the truth," he said. "We never should have got married."

"What are you talking about?" She was no good at feigning inno-

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cence. He thought she was naturally honest. Living a lie must have been a torment, but things had gone too far for him to feel a spurt of sympathy.

"Admit it. You're in love with Dave Sharpe, aren't you? That's always been your secret, hasn't it, *Melusine?* But you never had the bottle to tell me."

No actress could have faked the horror in her eyes. "You've got it all wrong."

"You lied to me," he said quietly. "But I found you out in the end."

"You don't understand!"

"Believe me, I do. You slut."

Tears were dribbling down her cheeks. For a moment she seemed transfixed and then she gave a little cry and ran out of the room and up the stairs. He heard her locking the door to their bedroom. No problem. He wasn't going after her just now. There was something else—this came to him in a slap of understanding—that he must do first.

He didn't bother to wash or shave; he was past all that. From upstairs came the sound of loud, racking sobs, but as he unlocked his van, he felt a strange sense of calm, as if for the whole of his life he'd been wandering aimlessly, but now he'd found a mission.

Where could he find Dave Sharpe? At one time Dave's round had covered the village and its outskirts, but now he was a floater and covered for colleagues who were sick or on holiday, so he moved around the area. He said he preferred this; he liked the variety, but more than that, there was often a chance to meet new women. Countless times he regaled the Wheatsheaf saloon bar with anecdotes of nymphomaniac housewives who asked him in while their husbands were out at work. If only his restless womanising hadn't encompassed Melanie.

As Jason turned on the ignition, he saw the bedroom curtain twitch. His wife, furtively watching him drive out of their marriage. He slammed his foot down on the accelerator and the van shot out into the road, narrowly missing a milk float. His plan was to follow a circular route, heading out west first and then up and around the hillside before returning to the village. Sooner or later, he was sure to come across Dave Sharpe.

It took longer than he expected, but five miles from home he finally spotted his target. Dave was delivering a parcel at an isolated cottage at the end of a short lane. The woman on the doorstep was white-haired and frail, so Dave would not be lingering. The lane was narrow and Jason parked his van across to block it. He watched the woman go back inside her home and Dave climb onto his bicycle. Jason picked up the bolt gun from the passenger's seat. Keeping it behind his back, he shuffled out of the van to face his enemy.

"What . . . Oh, it's you! Christ, Jason, what are you playing at?"

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Jason said nothing. Dave dismounted and leaned his bike against the hedge. He marched up and stared into Jason's eyes.

"Lost your tongue?"

"I've lost everything," Jason said.

An odd light came into Dave's eyes. "Is this about Mel?"

Jason showed him the gun. They were within touching distance of each other. Jason caught a whiff of the other man's aftershave. Aftershave! What sort of a postman doused himself in that muck when he went out on his round of a morning? Only one who wanted to shag any woman stupid enough to give him the glad eye.

Dave's cheeks lost all colour. Hoarsely, he said, "What are you doing? Put that down."

Jason lifted the gun and put it to Dave's forehead. "You think I'm stupid, don't you?"

"I think you're mad. You've lost it, mate, totally lost it."

Dave tensed. Jason knew that he was going to try to grab the gun. He would only have one chance to do this. As he fired, he tried to close his eyes, but they wouldn't shut. He saw agony in Dave's eyes as well as hearing his scream. Just like my first day at the abattoir, he thought.

The pithing was over so quickly. Even as the old lady opened her door, coming to see who or what had screamed, Jason was back in the van, reversing over the body just to make sure before turning for the village. Some of Dave's blood had splashed over him, but he didn't care. His mind was as empty as the fields as he raced along the narrow winding lanes to his home. What was he going to say to Melanie? Was she truly lost to him forever? Ought she to die as well?

Within minutes he was back. The front door was ajar. Bolt gun in hand, he kicked it wide open and strode inside. He could hear Melanie weeping. Well, now she had something to weep about. He took the stairs two at a time. The bedroom door was shut. If she'd locked it, he meant to kick it down. But when he smashed the gun against the door, it swung on its hinges.

A woman cried out. Then he heard another voice, softly murmuring. As he stepped inside the bedroom, something occurred to him. *This is all wrong.* Melanie was with someone. Yet he had killed Dave Sharpe.

Melanie was in bed. Her eyes were puffy, her cheeks wet. Her companion had wrapped a plump arm around her shoulders. They were naked, both Melanie and Cheryl Sharpe. *Yes, I got it so wrong.* Helpless as doomed lambs, neither of them able to move or speak, the lovers stared at him.

His hand shaking, he pointed the gun first at his wife and then at Cheryl, before changing his mind and raising it instead to his left temple. The cold steel nuzzled his skin. This, at least, was a necessary death. ●

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The Problem of the Black Cloister

by Edward D. Hoch

If impossible crimes are your cup of tea, you'll know there's no one better at creating them than Edward D. Hoch. The Rochester author has been chronicling the cases of his small-town hero Dr. Sam Hawthorne since 1974. The series has now reached the World War Two years, and there's no shortage of crime on the homefront for Sam and his new wife Annabel to solve. Next month we'll have an entry in the Rand series. †

Less than a week after the 1942 election that insured a seventh and final term for Sheriff Lens, the Allied invasion of French North Africa began. It was a joyous time for everyone, a sign that we had launched a major ground offensive at last. (Dr. Sam Hawthorne paused to refill the glass of his listener.) It was also a time for war-bond rallies in the cities, when celebrities sometimes came to help raise money for the war effort.

Towns like Northmont ordinarily would not have attracted a war-bond rally on any large scale, but as it turned out we had a local celebrity hardly anyone knew about. The November election brought us a new mayor, Cyril Bensmith, a slender, vigorous man of forty, a bit younger than me. I'd hardly known him before he ran for office, and I didn't know him much better now. His family had a small farm over near the town line, almost into the adjoining township of Shinn Corners, which probably explains why I hadn't heard about him or his boyhood chum Rusty Wagner.

Rusty'd been George Snider at the time. He didn't become Rusty till he moved to New York and landed the villain's role in a mildly successful Broadway play. From there he went off to Hollywood and became Paramount's answer to Humphrey Bogart. He was never as big a star as Bogart, but by April of 1943, with the Allies advancing in Tunisia and many of the younger male stars in the service, Rusty Wagner was doing his part by touring the country selling war

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bonds. Health problems and his age, just turning forty, had kept him out of the army. When Mayor Bensmith heard he'd be at a rally in Boston he invited his old friend to make a side trip to his hometown.

"Did you hear the news?" my nurse April asked that morning. "Rusty Wagner is coming here for the war-bond drive."

"We don't go to many movies," I admitted, though the town boasted a pretty good theater. "I guess I've seen him once or twice."

"I'm going to help out on the drive," she said. April's husband André was away in the service and I could understand her urge to get involved.

"That's good. I'll come and buy a bond from you," I promised.

That night at home I mentioned it to my wife Annabel, who showed a bit more excitement than I had. "That's great news, Sam! Something's finally happening in this town."

I smiled at her remark. "A lot of people think too much happens here already. Our murder rate—"

"I wish you wouldn't blame yourself whenever somebody gets killed in Northmont. I'm sure there were murders here before you ever came to town. I'll have to ask Sheriff Lens when he and his wife come to dinner."

The sheriff had been elected to his first term in 1918, just days before the armistice that ended the war. I hadn't moved to town and set up my practice until a few years later, in January of '22, and for some reason we'd never really talked much about Northmont's past crimes.

We dined with Sheriff Lens and his wife Vera every couple of months, and it was their turn to come to our house two nights later. While Vera helped Annabel with dinner in the kitchen I engaged the sheriff in conversation. "Annabel and I were talking the other night about Northmont's crime rate. How was it before I came here in 'twenty-two? Did you have just as many murders?"

Sheriff Lens chuckled, resting his hand on the glass of sherry my wife had provided. "Can't say that I remember any at all before you came to town, Doc. Guess you brought 'em with you." He took a sip from the glass and added, "There was the fire over at the Black Cloister, of course, but no one ever suggested that was murder."

I'd driven past the burnt-out building several times during the past twenty years, wondering why the county didn't just tear it down and sell the land at auction. "Exactly what happened there?" I asked.

"Well, it was in the late summer of 'twenty-one. The place had been built late last century as a sort of farming commune for disenchanted monks and other religious men who'd left their various orders but weren't ready to return to the secular world. Occasionally they took in one or two juvenile offenders if the courts asked them to, on the theory that a hard day's work might set them straight. Nobody paid much attention to them out there, except about once a month when a couple of them came into town for sup-

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plies. They called it the Black Cloister, named for the Augustinian monastery in Germany where Martin Luther lived. After the Reformation the monks moved out but Luther continued to live there, offering shelter to former monks and travelers. Upon his marriage in fifteen twenty-five the building was given to him as a wedding gift."

"You know a good deal about it, Sheriff."

"Well, Vera's a Lutheran even though we were married by a Baptist minister. We got talking about the Black Cloister one night and she filled me in on all that history."

"I heard my name mentioned," Vera Lens said as she came in to join us. "Dinner will be ready in three minutes."

"Doc was just wondering about the Black Cloister," the sheriff explained.

"Funny you should mention that, Sam. We're putting together an antique auction for the war-bond rally and someone donated the ornate oak front door from the Black Cloister. You can see it along with the other antiques down at the town hall."

"Maybe I'll take a look. When is this all going to happen?"

"Next Tuesday, the twentieth. That's the day after the Boston rally. They're tying it in with Patriots' Day and the Boston Marathon." Easter Sunday that year was not until April twenty-fifth, the latest it could be.

We took our seats at the table as Annabel came in with our salads. "I was just talking to Vera about the rally," she told me. "I told her I wanted to help out, too."

"A lot of people are. April at my office said she'd help. There's nothing like a movie star to brighten things up."

"Rusty Wagner isn't exactly a heartthrob," Vera remarked, plunging her fork into the salad. "Sometimes his face looks like it went through a meat grinder."

"He makes a perfect villain, though," Annabel said. "I saw a couple of his films before we were married." Turning to me, she said, "Sam, we have to start going to the movies more."

Somehow the conversation never did get back to the fire at the Black Cloister. It wasn't until Sunday afternoon, two days before the scheduled rally, when I accompanied Annabel to the town hall and stood before the fire-scorched door, that I remembered the burned building. The thick oak door was indeed a thing of beauty, leaning against the wall. Its front showed a bas-relief of a hooded monk kneeling in prayer, and this is what would have greeted visitors to the Cloister.

"You can see the door was badly scorched in the fire," Vera said as she came up to join us. We were in the ornate lobby of the town hall, where a score of items of all shapes and sizes had been assembled for the auction.

I ran my fingers over the bas-relief, admiring the carving.

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"Looks as if there are a few little wormholes in it, though," Annabel remarked.

There were indeed, toward the sides and top of the door. I pulled it away from the wall, but the back was smooth and unmarked, without a trace of scorching. "What was the story about this fire?" I asked Vera. "It was before I moved here."

"I was pretty young then myself, but I remember the Cloister as some sort of religious community. There was a fire and one young man died. After that the rest of the community just scattered."

"Who owns the property?"

"I have no idea. Felix Pond at the hardware store donated the door. He said it had been in the family for years, but I don't know that they ever owned the place."

"How does this charity auction sell war bonds?" Annabel asked.

Vera Lens explained. "People bid by purchasing the bonds, so it's not really costing them anything. They get their money back when the bonds are redeemed. The items are all donated and I don't imagine they have any great value. But something like this door could be cleaned up and painted and put to good use. Some church might even like it."

I ran my fingers over the wood once more, again impressed by the workmanship. "I wonder who carved this. Was it someone locally, or perhaps one of the residents at the Black Cloister?"

"It's possible Mayor Bensmith might know."

"I think I'll ask him."

Cyril Bensmith had a dairy farm on the North Road. His tall, gaunt frame reminded some of Abraham Lincoln, though he'd never thought of entering politics until his wife died a few years earlier. They had no children, and perhaps in search of a new beginning he'd run for mayor and been elected handily. He still worked his farm every day. Being mayor of Northmont was not a time-consuming occupation.

He had just arrived at the town hall and was greeting people with a handshake when I went up to him. "How are you, Sam? Good to see you here. I think the rally on Tuesday's going to be a big success."

"It should be," I agreed, "especially with Rusty Wagner's appearance."

"Rusty's an old friend. I haven't seen him in years, but we've stayed in touch."

"I was admiring that door from the old Cloister," I explained, gesturing toward it. "Know anything about it?"

"No more than you. Felix Pond at the hardware store donated it."

"I was wondering if the carving was by a local person."

"I couldn't tell you that. If there's an opportunity you might ask Rusty when he's here Tuesday."

"Rusty?"

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"He was living at the Black Cloister at the time of the fire."

"How old would he have been at that time?"

"Eighteen, I think. Same age as me. He and another boy, Fritz, were caught stealing a car in Hartford. The judge suggested they could avoid jail by spending the summer doing farm work at the Cloister and they agreed quickly enough. That's how I got to know Rusty. His name was George then, but he never liked it. We saw a lot of each other that one summer, before the fire."

He moved on to greet others, and I was left with unanswered questions.

On Monday Sheriff Lens stopped by my office in a wing of Pilgrim Memorial Hospital. He was chatting with April as I finished seeing the morning's last patient and I invited him into my examining room. "Everything set for the bond rally tomorrow, Sheriff?"

"I guess so. Vera's had me run ragged, picking up donations for the auction."

"I was talking to our mayor yesterday and he tells me Rusty Wagner was a resident of the Black Cloister. You never did finish about the fire."

"It was so long ago I can barely remember it now. Like I said, it was the summer of 'twenty-one. The Cloister was home to about a dozen men, some from a Trappist monastery that had closed, and others from various Protestant denominations. They were men with problems or at loose ends. There were also those two kids doing farm work to avoid prison. I guess Rusty Wagner was one of them. The other fellow was killed in the fire."

"Tell me about it."

Sheriff Lens sighed. "Don't you have enough mysteries in the present to satisfy you, Doc? This was no impossible crime or anything. No crime at all, far as I know. The fire started in the kitchen somehow and spread to the rest of the house. It was in the afternoon and the other residents were out in the fields working. Wagner and this other young fellow, whose name I don't recall—"

"The mayor said it was Fritz."

"That's right, Fritz Heck. Anyway, they were preparing the evening meal when it happened. Wagner managed to get out with a few bad burns, but the other boy didn't make it. I suppose that little scarring on Wagner's face didn't hurt when he started playing villain roles."

That was pretty much all he remembered, but I was still interested in tracking down the origin of that door. I drove over to Felix Pond's hardware store on my lunch hour and waited while he took care of a couple of customers. Pond was a bristling, bearded man who seemed strong as an ox, constantly carrying lumber and supplies out to waiting wagons. I was not one of his regular customers, but he knew me by sight. "Dr. Hawthorne! What brings

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you here? Got a need for a hammer or screwdriver?"

"Curiosity brings me," I told him. "I was admiring that door from the old Cloister and they told me you'd donated it. I wondered how you came by it."

"That's easy," he said with a grin. "I stole it, years ago. The place seemed to be just rotting away after the fire. The residents had all scattered and no one was even sure who owned the property. It was a sin to see that fancy door just sit there and decay like that so I took it home with me. Stored it in my supply shed out back and forgot all about it till somebody asked me about it last year."

"It might be worth some money," I speculated.

"Sure might! It's fine workmanship, made by one of the original residents of the Cloister. But I figured I couldn't really sell it since it wasn't mine to begin with. When someone suggested I donate it for the bond auction it seemed like a good idea."

"I'm sure people will bid on it. I might even do so myself." But then something clicked in my mind. "Tell me, Felix. Did you decide to donate this to the bond auction after you heard Rusty Wagner was going to be here?"

He frowned at my question. "Why would I do that?"

"Someone told me he was living in the Cloister at the time of the fire."

"Really?" He thought about it. "I guess maybe it was after we heard he was coming. Can't remember who suggested it, though."

I left the hardware store, wondering more than ever what was bringing Rusty Wagner back to Northmont.

Tuesday was sunny and mild, a perfect spring day to greet the crowd that had turned out for the war-bond rally. It was nothing compared to the Boston crowd, of course, but I recognized several people from Shinn Corners and other towns who'd driven over for the event. We'd set up a stage in the town square, with a billowing flag bunting as a backdrop. The auction items were all on view, including the Cloister door standing upright against one of the backdrop supports.

Just before the rally began, Mayor Bensmith made a point of introducing me to the star attraction, Rusty Wagner. He was shorter than I'd expected, and his features were a bit sharper. Close up I could see the scarring on the right side of his face. It appeared that the skin had been burnt, apparently during the Cloister fire. The damaged area was not large and could have been easily covered by makeup if he wished. Accompanying him was his manager, a fellow named Jack Mitchell, looking uncomfortable in a suit already rumpled from their train trip.

"I understand you lived here for a time," I said, shaking Wagner's hand.

He smiled pleasantly. "A long time ago, one summer before I

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moved to New York City. The town has changed a lot since then."

The mayor rested a hand on his old friend's shoulder. "We're going to start in a few minutes. You'd better get in position on the stage." He turned to me with a wink. "We want to open with a bang, like in Rusty's movies."

For a moment I didn't know what he meant. Then, as Wagner took the stage amidst an outburst of applause, a man in a German officer's uniform suddenly appeared from behind the flag bunting and stood before the Cloister door, taking aim at him with a Luger pistol. There were screams from the spectators as a shot rang out and Rusty Wagner clutched his chest, falling to the floor.

Immediately Mayor Bensmith sprang to the microphone, holding up his arms to calm the audience. "That, folks, is what could happen right here if not enough of us support our government with war bonds! Happily, the German officer is really our own Milt Stern, and Rusty Wagner is alive to fight another day." He motioned to the downed star. "Time to greet your public, Rusty!"

But Wagner remained sprawled on the floor of the stage without moving. I went quickly to his side. There was no blood, no sign of a wound, but I knew at once that he was dead.

When a well-known movie star dies before hundreds of people at a bond rally, it makes news all over the country. Mayor Bensmith and Sheriff Lens both knew Northmont would be on the front pages the following day and they turned to me for help. I urged them to calm down, reminding them that we didn't yet know the cause of Wagner's death. "One thing we know for sure, whatever killed him, it wasn't a bullet from Milt Stern's gun."

Nevertheless, while the mayor tried to calm the crowd and get on with the war-bond auction, Milt was the first person the sheriff and I questioned. He was a ten-year resident of Northmont, in his mid thirties, married with two children. For the past several years he'd worked at the local feed store. "Is Wagner dead?" he asked us at once. "They took him away in the ambulance and somebody said he was breathing."

"He's dead, son," Sheriff Lens told him. "We just didn't want to announce it right away and put a damper on things. After the bond rally's over there'll be an announcement."

Stern passed over the German Luger for our examination. "All I had was one blank cartridge in it." I slid out the clip and confirmed that it was empty. "The mayor got the gun and uniform from a theatrical costume place in Boston."

"It was the mayor's idea?" I asked.

"Well, he was talking about something like that to start things with a bang. I volunteered to play a Nazi and fire a blank at him."

The facts were clear-cut and I would have been awfully surprised

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if the autopsy showed Rusty Wagner had been poisoned or choked to death. It didn't. By the following morning we knew that he'd died of a heart attack. There was no wound anywhere on his body.

Still, I stopped by the mayor's office to have a talk with him. "Apparently the man had a weak heart," I said. "Maybe that's what kept him out of the army, that and his age."

"It's just a tragedy it had to happen here," Mayor Bensmith said. "He could have dropped dead in Boston just as well."

"Tell me something. Did you explain to Wagner exactly what you had planned, with the Nazi officer and all? Did he know someone would fire a blank cartridge at him?"

"Certainly. I went over every bit of it with him as soon as he arrived. My secretary, Rita, was with us at the time." He called her into the office. "Rita, what did I tell Rusty Wagner when we met him at the station?"

Rita Innes was a prim middle-aged woman who'd worked in Bensmith's office at the farm before his election as mayor. He'd taken her with him to the elective office and she'd settled in well. Now she answered, "You explained about the man dressed as a Nazi who'd fire a blank at him. He'd fall to the stage and you'd tell the audience to buy bonds. He wasn't surprised. He said he'd acted out scenes for audiences in other cities, too."

"The heart attack was just a coincidence, happening when it did," Bensmith decided.

I had to agree with him. From both a medical and a legal viewpoint, there'd been no crime.

Wagner's death had completely overshadowed the war-bond auction, and it was a couple of days later before I saw Vera Lens and remembered to ask her about it. "We did well," she reported, "considering everything."

"Who bought that door from the Black Cloister?"

"Funny you should ask. It went to a man named Jack Mitchell. He was Rusty Wagner's manager and was making the tour with him. The door's still here. We're supposed to ship it to him in California."

On the following Monday, the day after Easter, I was driving past the ruins of the old Cloister and decided to stop. Walking through the high grass to the gaping front entrance, I found a roof partly burned through, and weathered walls still showing scars from the fire. There was evidence of children playing there, and ground into the dirt out back I found a used shotgun shell. Every farm family kept a weapon close at hand. There were always varmints on the prowl.

After lunch I stopped in to see Sheriff Lens at his office. "I drove by the Black Cloister this morning and took a look. Can you tell me any more about the fire and your investigation?"

The sheriff gave one of his familiar sighs. "Doc, there's no crime

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for you to solve, neither here nor back in nineteen twenty-one. That Rusty Wagner could be killed by a shot from a blank cartridge isn't an impossible crime, it's no crime at all!"

"Let's get back to the Cloister fire for the moment. Tell me about the young man who died there."

He went over to the file and opened the bottom drawer. "I haven't looked at that folder myself in years. Probably should have discarded it after all this time." Opening the slender file, he took out some papers and a few photographs. "The victim's name was Fritz Heck. He was eighteen, same age as Wagner. Nice-looking fellow. That's him on the right in this photo."

"Is this Wagner with him?"

"No, it's Heck's younger brother."

I nodded. "I should have guessed that from the resemblance."

"We got the photo from the family in Hartford, for identification purposes. There was no doubt it was him, though. Heck's fingerprints were on file with the Hartford police. Him and Wagner stole a car but didn't know much about driving it."

"How did the fire start?"

"Wagner told me they were preparing dinner, chatting about a girl they'd met in town, when Heck got careless and some hot grease caught fire. They tossed water on it but that just spread it around. The flames went up along the ceiling and into the living room." He referred to his notes and Wagner's statement. "Heck ran into the living room and tried to beat it out, but it was too late. He was trapped by the fire and smoke, and died inside the front door, trying to get it open."

"Why is the house still standing after all these years?"

Sheriff Lens shrugged. "I heard tell Heck's family bought it, wanted it as a memorial to their son. But they never did anything except pay the taxes."

"Did you ever meet any of them?"

He shook his head. "If they came here I didn't see them. Of course the body was shipped back to Hartford for burial."

"What about Rusty Wagner? What happened to him after the fire?"

"They took him back to Hartford, too, for treatment of his burns. We heard later that he moved to New York and was in a play. Mayor Bensmith was a friend of his and stayed in touch over the years." He squinted at me over the tops of his glasses. "You're tryin' to make something out of all this, aren't you?"

"I'm trying," I agreed with a smile. I picked up the snapshot of Fritz Heck and studied it. "Do you have an autopsy report there?"

"Well, not really. Back in 1921, Northmont's coroner was just a local sawbones eager to make a few extra bucks. He just had to look at the body to know the fire killed Heck. The Hartford police furnished us with medical records on the two boys, though."

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He passed them over to me and I glanced quickly through them. There were the usual childhood illnesses, plus a serious bout of influenza for Heck during the nineteen nineteen epidemic. Wagner had suffered from rheumatic fever twice as a child, but had escaped the flu. "What else do you have there?"

"Just Wagner's statement on the fire, which I've told you about. His face was burnt trying to save his friend."

I thought about that. "Do you have a phone number for this manager of his, Jack Mitchell?"

"I think it's here somewhere. Why do you want it?"

"Vera says he was high bidder on that Cloister door. It seems an odd thing to bother about when your client has just died."

I phoned Mitchell's West Coast office and after some delay was put through to him. "Mr. Mitchell, this is Dr. Hawthorne, back in Northmont. We're still investigating Rusty Wagner's unfortunate death."

"Yes," he replied. "I just got in the office. I've been making arrangements for the memorial service. What can I do for you?"

"I'm told that you were high bidder for the door from the Black Cloister, where Rusty lived for a time."

"That's correct. He wanted me to bid on it for him. It seemed very important to him. When the ambulance took him away I was hoping he was still alive. I entered my bid on the door before following him to the hospital."

"What do you plan to do with the door?"

"Do with it?" his voice rasped over the phone. "Nothing. Now that he's dead you can keep the door, auction it off again."

"Did he have any reason for wanting it so badly?"

"None that I know of. He'd lived at that Cloister for one whole summer. I suppose it brought back memories."

"I'm sure it did," I agreed. "His friend died in the fire, and he was badly burned."

"He never went into detail about it. He just asked me to buy the door at the auction."

I thanked him and hung up. Sheriff Lens asked, "Did you learn anything?"

"He doesn't want the door now that Wagner's dead. He said we should keep it and auction it off again."

"I'll tell Vera."

"Where's the door now?"

"Still over at the town hall. In the mayor's office, I think."

"Let's go have another look at it," I suggested.

We walked across the square to the town hall. Mayor Bensmith hadn't yet returned from lunch, but his secretary Rita showed us the door leaning against his office wall. "We're waiting for shipping instructions," she informed us.

"He doesn't want it," I told her. "We'll auction it again."

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I moved over to examine the door more closely and asked Rita. "Do you have a pair of tweezers?"

"I think so." She went back to her desk and returned with them.

"What are you after, Doc?" Sheriff Lens wanted to know.

"I'm not sure, but I know Wagner wanted this door, and his statement to you at the time of the fire wasn't completely accurate."

"How's that?"

"He said Fritz Heck died inside the front door, trying to get it open. But look at this door. The scorching is on the outside, while the inside is unmarked by flames. This door had to be open at the time of the fire, and if that was the case how could Heck have been trapped there by the fire and smoke? He could have simply run outside."

"I never thought of that," the sheriff admitted.

I took a penknife from my pocket. "I wish we'd had a more complete autopsy report."

"In those days—"

"I know." I concentrated on one of the wormholes Annabel had noticed earlier, enlarging it a bit with my knife. Then I went to work with the tweezers. After a moment I extracted what I was seeking.

"What is it, Doc?"

"Buckshot. Annabel thought they were wormholes, but I noticed the other side was unmarked. These were worms that went in but didn't come out. Notice the unusual pattern they formed." I pointed out a half-dozen small holes toward the sides and top of the door.

"A buckshot pattern would be more circular," he argued.

"Not if something or someone had been in its way. Don't you see, Sheriff? Fritz Heck was standing by this open door when someone fired a shotgun at him. I know they probably had one on the premises because I found an old shotgun shell in the dirt there. The missing pellets from the pattern are in Heck's body, and judging by the close grouping of these other pellets that shotgun blast was probably enough to kill him."

"Rusty Wagner was the only one in the house at the time."

"Exactly," I told him. "We'll never know now what happened, but Wagner told you they'd been chatting about a girl they met. Maybe they argued about her, maybe Wagner picked up the shotgun that every farmhouse had in those days and tried to drive Heck from the Cloister. Maybe it went off accidentally by the front door."

"Then he started the fire deliberately?"

I nodded. "To cover the crime. He probably made a special point of burning the body, to cover up the wounds from the shotgun pellets. When he got too close and burned his own face it added verisimilitude to his story."

"Any coroner today would have found those shotgun pellets."

"Probably. He certainly would have spotted the absence of smoke in the lungs, a sure sign that Heck was already dead when

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the fire started."

Sheriff Lens sighed. "With Wagner dead there's not much point in exhuming the body now."

"None whatsoever."

"I only wish you'd been around here a year earlier, Doc, and I wouldn't have missed all this. It was a perfect crime."

I shook my head. "No, Sheriff. The perfect crime was the murder of Rusty Wagner in front of this building last Tuesday. And there's not a thing we can do about it."

As it happened, Annabel and I were dining at Max's Steakhouse, our favorite restaurant, a few nights later when I spotted Milt Stern drinking at the bar. "Excuse me for a few minutes," I told her. "I'm going to talk to him."

"Sam! You said you wouldn't."

But I got up anyway and went over to him. "Got a few minutes, Milt?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"I just want to chat. Over in that empty booth would be best."

He glanced toward Annabel at our table. "You shouldn't leave her alone."

"This won't take long."

He followed me to the booth and slid in the other side. "So what's this all about?"

"Rusty Wagner."

"God, I feel terrible about that! It's as if I'd murdered him."

"You did."

He moistened his lips and gave a half laugh. "Well, not really. The gun had a blank cartridge in it."

"What was it that made you move here, Milt? Did you know your brother had been murdered that day up at the Cloister?"

"He wasn't—"

"Yes he was, Milt. I saw the snapshot of the two of you and even then I noticed the resemblance. Ten years ago you left Hartford and moved here, changing your name from the German Heck to its English meaning, *stern*. You suspected all along that Wagner had killed your brother. Perhaps he hinted at trouble between them in one of his letters. Once here you settled down and married. Somewhere along the line you saw the Cloister door that Felix Pond had rescued from the place, and recognized those little 'wormholes' for what they were. When you heard that Wagner would be coming here to take part in a war-bond drive, the idea came to you."

"What idea?"

"You would suggest to Pond that he donate that old door for the war-bond auction. Then, when the mayor was discussing a clever way to bring Wagner on stage, you volunteered to dress in a Nazi

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costume and fire a blank pistol at him. You knew, of course, that he'd had rheumatic fever twice as a child. Perhaps your brother mentioned it or you read it in a movie fan magazine. Such a medical history almost certainly would have left him with a weak heart, probably the reason for his draft deferral."

"He knew in advance I was going to fire a blank pistol at him," Milt Stern said. "That wouldn't have caused a heart attack."

"Perhaps not alone. But when he came onto that stage what he saw was the friend he'd killed twenty-two years ago, aged a bit but still recognizable, standing in front of that same door and pointing a gun at him. In the instant the gun went off, his weak heart failed."

"Do you really expect anyone to believe that?"

"No," I admitted. "Certainly not a jury."

Milt Stern smiled at me. "Then why are you telling me this? Who else have you told?"

"Sheriff Lens knows, and the mayor soon will know. They can't bring any charge against you, but it might be better if you left Northmont, moved back to Hartford."

He studied my face for a long time. "Don't you understand it's something I had to do? Whether he lived or died was out of my hands."

"Whether you stay or go is out of my hands, too," I told him.

"All right," he said at last. "I'll take your advice."

I left the booth and went back to join Annabel. I'd done all that I could. ●

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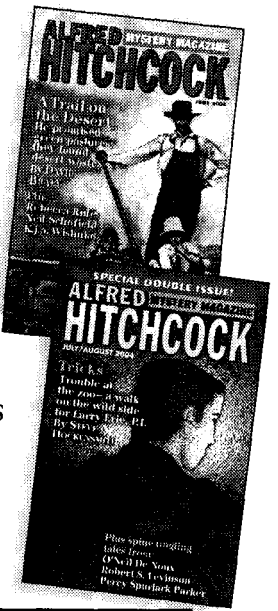

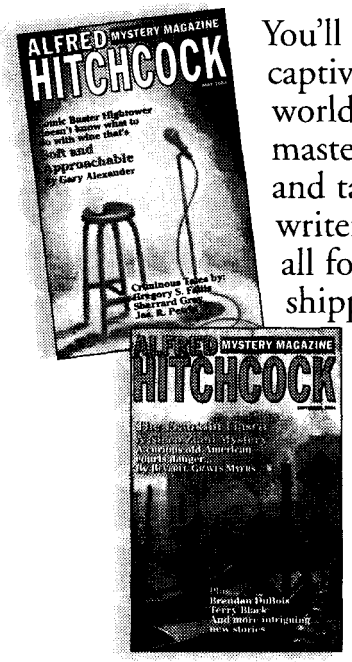

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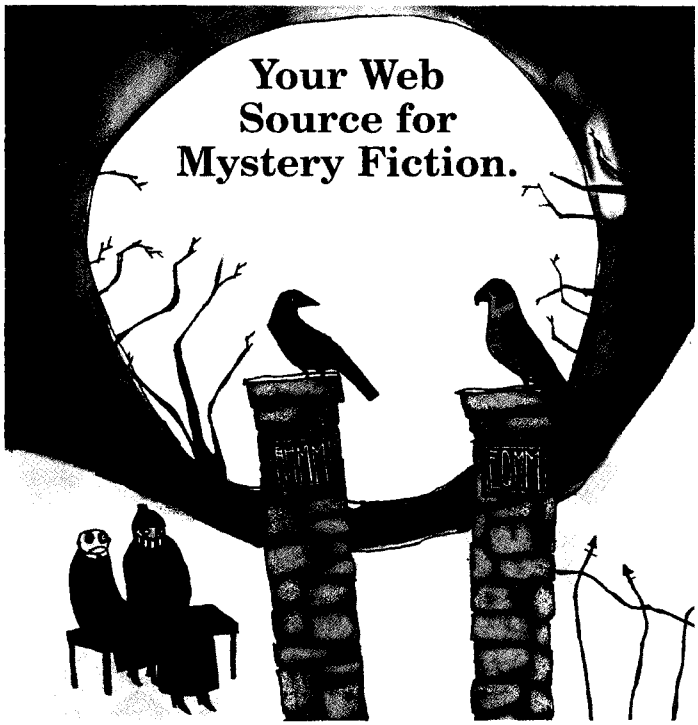

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